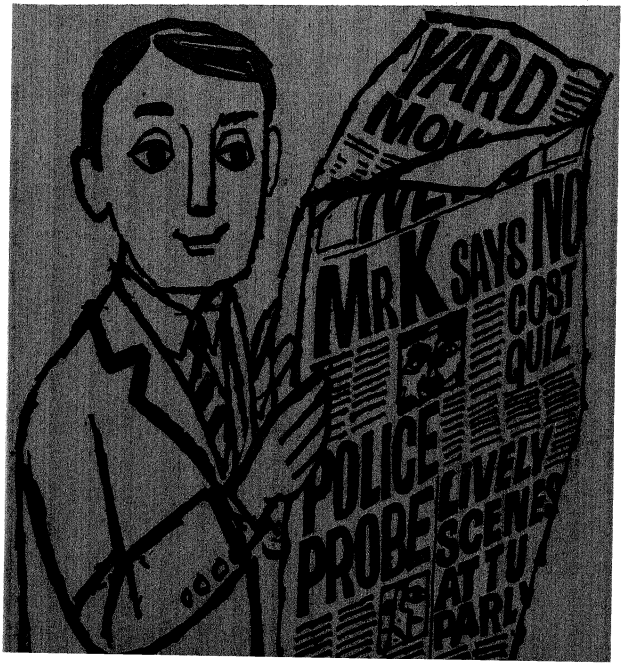
MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!

IVOR BROWN



Have you ever realised that when you talk of your '*fabulous* holiday' you are really describing it as something that never happened ? Or that when you say 'My dear, I was absolutely *livid !*' you are suggesting that you look bruised and blue all over ? (And 'my dear' may be someone for whom you have no affection at all.) Have you ever thought about the words you use every day and wondered if some of them may not have worn out by being used so constantly?

Ivor Brown, well-known critic, broadcaster, and collector of words, has written this book with the intention of making his young readers think twice before speaking or writing another word. He discusses slang, dialect, North American usage, and suggests what fun can be found in enlarging your vocabulary and exploring the English Dictionary. He ends with a chapter of advice to would-be authors who want to know how to develop a style of writing of their own.

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MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!

APR 1965
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

I Give you my Word

I Break my Word

A Word in Edgeways

Chosen Words

Words in our Time

Words in Season

etc.

Mind Your Language!

IVOR BROWN

ILLUSTRATED BY DEREK COUSINS

DUFOUR EDITIONS

CHESTER SPRINGS, PENNSYLVANIA

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Bright is the ring of words when the right
man rings them – *Robert Louis Stevenson*

Proper words in proper places make the true
definition of a style – *Dean Swift*

Hold fast the form of sound words –
The Second Epistle of St Paul to Timothy

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T. S. Eliot

CHAPTER ONE

OUR WEALTH OF WORDS

We are lucky in our language and lucky because of its mixed and curious parentage. People of all nations like to pride themselves on the purity of their blood and they often esteem their animals for the same reason, calling them thorough-breds. Among dogs the mongrel may be an intelligent and friendly product of mixed mating: but he wins no prizes and has no market value. In the matter of words, however, wealth can lie in variety of origin and the English language has been much enriched just because it is a mongrel.

Within our boundaries there are languages more or less pure, but they have been driven to the west and north. The language spoken by the Ancient Britons whom the Romans conquered and over-ran was presumably the ancestor of that which remains in some of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, is more strongly maintained in Wales, has disappeared almost entirely from Cornwall, and is officially supported, without much popular support, in Southern Ireland. The Gaelic of the Highlands has long parted company with Welsh and to a less extent with Ireland's Erse, but they are kindred tongues and they are to a great extent pure tongues which have not inter-bred with those of invading races. English, on the other hand, because of its confused descent, is like a cook who has studied

many alien menus. So it provides a banquet of words with dishes brought from many larders and kitchens.

One may look at words not only as nourishing matter: they are exports and imports. All over Europe and into America they have been carried on the winds of change and on the tides of time, and constantly that wind has been from the east. Since the civilisations which ultimately created ours grew up in the Middle or Near East, especially in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile, and then moved northwards into Asia Minor and Greece, the art of devising and using the words which civilisation needs was carried by that easterly wind. This art was developed with astonishing speed and delicacy in Ancient Greece where one of the most beautiful and subtle languages ever known was in existence a thousand years before the Christian era and perhaps longer than that.

Then the east wind started blowing again. The Romans conquered Greece and took at least some of the Greek language westward to Italy. The Romans next over-ran and ruled Western Europe and carried their speech, known as Latin, which had absorbed Greek elements, into France and Spain and at last Britain. So Italian, French, and Spanish are known as Latin languages and they have remained comparatively pure: that is to say the external contributions made by invaders, e.g. the Moors bringing Arabic into Spain, have been comparatively small. When the Norman French swept into Britain and imposed their own forms of government and culture upon England the language which they employed and brought with them

was of the Latin type. This later Latin had begun to vary from one district to another, but it had plenty of common roots and forms.

But much had happened to English speech before that. The Romans and the Ancient Britons did not mix their languages and we do not clearly know how they communicated with each other. When the Romans had to leave England owing to the collapse of their empire at the centre, about A.D. 400, they took their language along with them leaving behind only a few words, for the British, if they had learned Latin for purposes of trade and employment, soon dropped it. What lingered on were terms natural to a military occupation, which depended on harbours, roads, and camps. Thus such Latin words as port from the Roman *portus*, street from the Roman *strata*, mile from the Roman for a thousand paces, and chester from the Roman *castrum* for a camp, stayed behind as relics of the Roman rule.

So the Britons had some, but strangely few, mementoes of the old régime imbedded in their vocabulary and their place-names. One or two words went west with the Britons when again that east wind blew and the next invaders from Eastern Europe, Angles, Saxons, and later Danes, first raided the shores and then poured in as settlers. Porth for harbour was taken by the retreating Britons to Wales and Cornwall when they were forced back into the far west. So was pont, from the Roman word for a bridge.

The new arrivals imposed their own language on Britain as the Romans had never done. So the English

speech called Anglo-Saxon was slowly built up with Scandinavian additions. This became the foundation of the English spoken and written today not only here but in America, a tongue now in frequent use all over the world owing to the far-flung influence of colonists, sailors, traders, and religious missionaries. Then a south wind blew a gale in 1066 when the Dukes of Normandy sailed in to become the Kings of England and established a new ruling class of governors, landowners, and officials who made their kind of French, essentially Latin, the official language of the conquered island.

But the common people whom they had dominated and whose land they had seized did not, fortunately, surrender their native Anglo-Saxon speech. They held on to their Germanic and Scandinavian vocabulary and at times it must have been very hard for the Norman lords to understand or be understood by the peasants who had become their workers on the land. In a brief history of England in verse called 'The Secret People' G. K. Chesterton has nicely summed up this phase of English history:

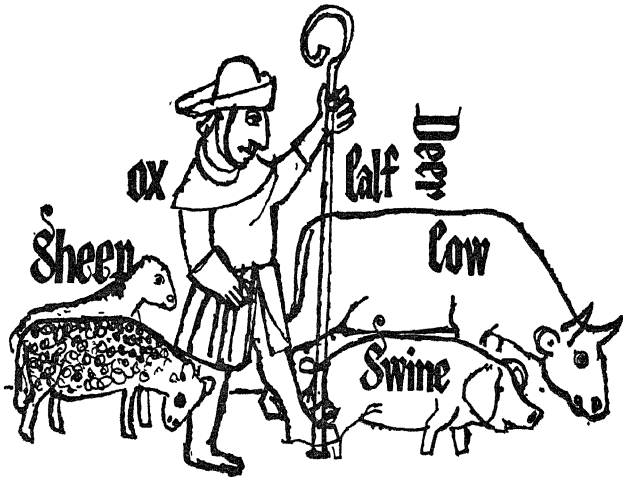
The fine French kings came over in a flutter of flags and dames;
We liked their smiles and battles, but we never could say their names.

It is doubtful whether the battles were so popular, but this flutter of Norman grandeur brought a new kind of art and elegance which the simpler English could wonder at, especially when the Norman churches and

cathedrals began to arise with, of course, the help of English stone-cutters and masons. The mixing of labour in the crafts speeded the mixing of speech.

Gradually the two languages became inter-married. The conquerors of England had not conquered the English language and the latter, so far from retreating, advanced. There was a triumph for the native tongue, when, in the year 1362, Parliament was first opened in English and all legal cases began to be conducted in English too. But the Norman words had sunk into this new compost of sounds and meanings just as much as the English words. It is hard for us to realise in our age of instantaneous communication of news by wireless how widely separated the various sections of the people could be even in a small island. Consequently there were many dialects in the different regions. But in time the new Norman-Saxon English of the chief administrative area and centres of scholarship, that is London, Oxford and Cambridge, the South and the Midlands, became accepted as an early kind of Standard English. This was further established when Caxton started the printing of books and when the capacity and opportunity for reading were not so limited as before. Printing began to stabilise what had once been vague and changeable.

By this time there had come into general use a mixed French-English in which naturally the over-lord people from Normandy provided many of the words used to describe ownership, government, and the amenities or luxuries of life. A notable example of this process is to be found in the naming of animals and the



food they provided. Since the herdsmen were Anglo-Saxon their words for their beasts survived, ox, sheep, calf, swine, and deer: since the flesh, or the better parts of it, went to the tables of their masters, the meats were denoted by a French vocabulary, beef, mutton, veal, pork, and venison. Social titles too were nearly all French: duke, marquis, and baron were examples of that. But knight was English (from the old *cniht*), perhaps because knights ranked lower.

Throughout the sixteenth century another wind blew in from the west. The further discovery and widely spread study of Greek and Latin texts produced what was called the Renaissance or re-birth of learning: there was a further flowering too of the arts, especially in Italy, and much extension of travel. Painting and architecture achieved new splendours and

had to be seen by those who wished to be thought educated gentlemen. It became the habit of the young English aristocrats to tour in Europe in search not only of the new Renaissance culture but of elegant pleasures and diversions of all kinds. They brought back to England new fashions in taste, new handsomeness of costume, in which they took particular delight, and a host of new names for the vogues and vanities which they had acquired. In Shakespeare's plays there is frequent mention of the Frenchified gallants with their European foppery of ways and words. Mercutio, in *Romeo and Juliet*, though an Italian of Verona, speaks for the stay-at-home Englishman when he says: 'The pox of such lisping, affecting fantasticoes, these new tuners of accents! Why, is not this a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should be thus afflicted with

these strange flies, these fashion-mongers, these *pardonnez-mois*? Oh, their *bons*, their *bons*!'

But these travellers, while they may have brought back some posturing pretences and some silliness of the 'show-off' kind, did their country and its literature a great service because they brought in a wealth of new words to add to the Saxon-Norman mixture at home. Shakespeare laughed at those who flaunted their new-fangled tricks of behaviour and of speech, but he, like all the writers of his time, profited by the increased resources of the tongue in which they wrote. The vocabulary of the young man with a pen, whether he had been to Oxford or not, was now becoming what one of Shakespeare's characters called 'a banquet of words'.

Words began to come in from all quarters and were happily absorbed. The sailors who went round the world and fought the Spaniard in the West Indies brought back additions to the English treasury. From Spain came the desperado, the adventurer, who trapped his foe in an ambuscado, the term for ambush used by Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. The explorers and merchants who went east also increased the store of strange words for the strange novelties in which they traded. That process continued through the centuries. Many of our food-and-drink names were acquired that way. Tea came from China and coffee from Turkey in the middle of the seventeenth century, bringing their titles with them. Tea was Chinese *tcha* which we have turned into the slang char, wrongly since the cup of char is usually a strong Indian and

not the delicate Chinese tea. Cocoa was Portuguese: gong and gutta-percha Malayan. Sago is another Malayan name, this article being the pith of palms growing in the Malay peninsula. Tapioca, prepared from the roots of the Cassava plant, is of Spanish origin. Tobacco and potato were transported from the newly discovered America.

Still today the owner of a modern suburban house is drawing on a wide world for the names of the whole or parts of it. Villa is Latin. Verandah is of Portuguese and balcony of Italian origin. Attic came through the French from Athenian or Attic architecture. A visit to the greengrocer and fruiterer will take us among many aliens. Artichoke and apricot began as Arabic words and the peach is a slurred form of Persian. The umbrella and influenza might be thought natural imports from cold, wet places: but both arrived from sunny Italy, umbrella being first a protection against the sun, not the rain, a giver of shade, like the parasol, which is not much used today. Our ancestors were more frightened of the heat than we are in this age of sunbathing. We like to strip: they liked to take cover.

Influenza means, as its looks suggest, a flowing-in, and one naturally thinks of an invasion of germs in a state of flux. Our word influenza, which has been in use for more than two hundred years, has a curious history: the word influence in English was long ago connected with the supposed inflow of power from the stars, a power which affected and influenced the characters and fates of human beings. It was so used by the translators of the Book of Job in the Old

Testament who wrote of the influence of the Pleiades – these being seven stars in the constellation of Taurus. John Milton's well-known description of 'Ladies whose bright eyes rain influence' indicates a magical force and may suggest another kind of star to us, namely the film-star. So influenza was thought to be a natural term for another and far less pleasant kind of attack, the infection which causes serious epidemics. If ladies' eyes rained influence of one kind, the mouths and breaths of those already suffering from a feverish chill rained influenza. The French accurately call this kind of seizure *la grippe* and the Americans use the same name. We know with our shivers when we are thus gripped.

As Europe was ahead of England in the arts the travellers, impressed by the paintings and music they had met and admired, carried home with them most of the technical terms still in use. Basso and soprano sing in opera (the latter may be a prima donna) and all these, like piano, are Italians: but the singers get a French encore. Italian too are aquatint, replica, studio, and bust. The men of our ships met the Dutch in peace and war and from Holland they took their skippers and their docks. These are but a few of the new words that returned to England in travellers' tales or with the mementoes packed in their luggage. One could go on for a long time compiling a catalogue of the voyagers' enrichment of English.

So there were continual exotic additions to the Saxon-Norman compost which has been described. Before 1600 the English language had been vastly

enriched and a poet who wanted to make resonant verbal music had a newly swollen dictionary on which to draw. To appreciate this we may listen to Shakespeare when his King Lear is addressing the terrible storm in which he was benighted:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drencht our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

He begins with short, native, essentially English words. Then come the cataracts which are Greek and the hurricanoes which are Spanish. Vaunt-couriers are Norman French for fore-runners and thunder is Scandinavian. (Thor was the thunder-god of the Norsemen.) Rotundity is Latin. Thus, in a few lines, the English tongue has ranged from Athens to Seville and from Rome by way of Normandy to make this notable conglomeration of images and words.

Sometimes the old English word has lived side by side with the Norman French one. We have kept our native king and queen as well as our royalties and princes who came in with the Conqueror. The Normans, as victors, imposed their terms on the language of war in their time; they gave their names to the officer class from generals and colonels to captains and lieutenants. They went assaulting into battle with cavalry and infantry, with banners and gonfalons, they

laid siege, and they built fortresses and castles, contributing these military titles. But the English, having fought them and later fighting for them, retained that simple word of their old tongue, fight; and that was the word which Winston Churchill used in his great speeches of defiance in 1940. 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight in the fields and the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.' In that passage surrender is the only word of French origin and it was in a sad way pertinent since the French had just surrendered.

Here is an example of the interesting fact that when a writer or a speaker wants to rouse deep emotion he often finds it most easy to do so by sticking to the short English words and omitting the long classical formations. We need not think that this is always done by calculation. There seems to be an English instinct for such usage at the right moment. Nobody could fling about lengthy and resounding words of Latin birth with more delight and more effect than Shakespeare. When Hamlet is speaking to his father's Ghost he cries:

> *Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell*
> *Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,*
> *Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,*
> *Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,*
> *Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws*
> *To cast thee up again!*

Here he prefers the sonorous cerements to grave-clothes or winding-sheet and sepulchre to grave be-

cause he is creating a theatrical atmosphere for a somewhat melodramatic event. But, when Hamlet is dying and the audience is to be intensely and poignantly moved, his words are of the simplest as he talks to his dear friend, Horatio:

If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

It is true that absent and felicity are taken from Latin, but the rest is written in words of brevity as well as of the old Anglo-Saxon speech; they could not touch us more. In the same way, after all the stormy eloquence in *King Lear*, the broken old man speaks thus over the dead Cordelia:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never! –
Pray you, undo this button: – thank you, sir –
Do you see this? Look on her, – look, her lips, –
Look there, look there!

Apart from never and button, every word is of one syllable and the classical dictionary is avoided. But we need not turn only to Shakespeare for examples of this instinct for the short and simple and the home-bred terms. The little, seemingly unimpressive, word tear can draw more water from the eyes than any talk of

lamentation or lacrimation, which are the Latin words for wailing and weeping. Wordsworth knew that.

> *Thanks to the human heart by which we live,*
> *Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,*
> *To me the meanest flower that blows can give*
> *Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

Suppose that he had written of reflections too deep for lamentation! All would be lost. Grief itself is a little and a lovely noun and the words that come with it, woe, pain, tears, mourn, and sad, are no larger and are of the most elementary English kind. Like them are the terms we use to express our warmest feelings, love and hate.

Accordingly our wealth of words is made up of the small coinage as well as of the great. This treasury, as has been shown, came to us because our island was invaded and our islanders have sailed about the world. Some of these riches were brought to us and others collected by us. The double process has formed our fortunate inheritance and it is a natural duty to see that we keep the gold and silver deposits in our dictionaries, determined that they shall shine in our speech and writing as brightly as may be. We must also take care that when we have to add to our long-used and hard-used language we do so with good taste and to the best advantage.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LONG AND THE SHORT

It is sometimes claimed that better English would be written and spoken if we avoided long, classical words and used the short, Anglo-Saxon ones as much as possible. It has been pointed out that the latter kind of vocabulary is often instinctively used by writers and speakers, both in poetry and prose, when they wish to convey strong feeling. But the advantage of simplicity is not limited to that purpose. There can be saving of space, for example, if we call letters (for the post) by that name instead of calling them correspondence, or if we say that we mean to end this or that instead of to terminate or (a recent verbal fashion) to finalise it.

But there is no reason to make sweeping rules and to banish long words as though they were always pretentious and cumbersome. People do enjoy the sound of what may fairly be called a thumping big utterance and that is a natural, legitimate pleasure, especially of those who are discovering for the first time the fun to be found in a large vocabulary. Half a century ago H. G. Wells wrote an entertaining and even uproarious book about a shop assistant called Mr Polly. With one or two of his friends Mr Polly began to enlarge his poor education by random reading. So he came to relish the language that he found. He muddled and mispronounced words as he revelled in the eloquence of

Thomas Carlyle and other authors much addicted to a spacious and resonant vocabulary. 'Doing the High Froth', he called it. 'Spuming. Windmilling.' He invented names for the torrent of language in which he splashed. He spoke of Eloquent Rapsodooce and Sesquippledan Verboojuice. We need not bother with Sesquippledan, which is Mr Polly's form of an enormous Latin word for six-footed. But Rapsodooce and Verboojuice do really represent the sound and sap of the contents of the dictionary as they are savoured by a young and eager appetite. This feasting on verboojuice is what many of the greatest writers and speakers have done with delight. But, as in other kinds of feeding, it is well to know when to stop. There can be a surfeit.

The supreme authors, especially Shakespeare, have, as was shown, understood just when to turn from one style to another. I quoted Sir Winston Churchill's use of short words in a hard-hitting speech. But he has greatly enjoyed himself with the long ones. When a young man he amused the House of Commons by an answer to a complaint that certain forms of Chinese labour employed in South Africa were no better than slavery. This was his reply: 'It cannot in the opinion of His Majesty's Government be classified as slavery in the extreme acceptance of the word without some risk of terminological inexactitude.' Calling a lie a terminological inexactitude was obviously done, as it were, with a wink. But Sir Winston has in all seriousness enjoyed the use of a very big word where a little word would do. When he wrote in praise of painting pic-

tures as a peaceful pastime for the old, which does not impose any physical strain, he did not allude simply to the coming of old age; he called it 'the surly advance of decrepitude'. It has been said of Sir Winston that he has too much imitated the prose that was handsomely practised in the eighteenth century, especially of the methods employed by Edward Gibbon, the historian, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon liked to call changes vicissitudes and said 'all that is human must retrograde if it does not advance'. Why should things retrograde instead of merely going back, it may well be asked? There is no easy answer to that. But we have to remember that many of the most famous English books were written and the most famous English speeches were spoken when all educated people had been brought up to be familiar with the ancient classics and when long Latin words did not seem strange or bombastic to those who read or listened.

Dr Johnson, who did so much to stabilise English usage of words by the making of his Dictionary, often used terms which seem to us difficult or cumbrous. But some of his phrases have seemed so apt, although so ponderous, that they have become fixed in our vocabulary. Surely it is fair enough to attach weighty words to weighty matters. For instance, one frequently sees mention of 'inspissated gloom'. This was an expression used by Dr Johnson. Inspissated is Anglicised Latin for thickened, and those who do not care for long, Latin words can reject it and talk of dense or thick gloom instead. But inspissated, though the use of

it may be deemed pedantic, does sound right in this case. You can more vividly see the fog coming densely down on the street or feel depression settling heavily on the mind when a thumping adjective of this sort is used. A good test of fitness is survival. We have stuck to inspissated gloom: indeed, the adjective is rarely used of anything else.

Dr Johnson also talked of 'the potentiality of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice', when he might have mentioned the chance of growing rich beyond the dreams of greed. But he liked the sound of the extra syllables and we can like them too. Again, he made a very wise remark, 'If you are idle, be not solitary: if you are solitary, be not idle'. It would please some better if he had said alone instead of using the Latin solitary: but we need not worry about such trifles. He was, however, carrying his Latinity rather far when he talked of 'the anfractuosities of the human mind', when he meant the windings of the mind. An examinee of today who put anfractuosity into one of his answers might get a bad mark, unless the examiner was a devoted Johnsonian.

The public speaking of that period, in and out of Parliament, was of a kind to deserve Mr Polly's description of Eloquent Rapsodooce. Prominent among the orators was Edmund Burke who told his hearers that 'corrupt influence is the perennial cause of prodigality' when he might have said that bribery is always a cause of waste. But he could be simple too, as when he said 'The people are the masters', instead of thundering away about the domination of the multi-

tude or dictatorship of the proletariate. It must be admitted that public speaking can be made effective by the ample music of a full vocabulary as well as by the rousing drum-beat of short, sharp words such as those used by Sir Winston Churchill in his calls to arms and self-defence.

Length, too, can be amusingly employed when mockery is the speaker's purpose. The great Liberal statesman of the Victorian age, Gladstone, was a notable orator in the style known as orotund. (Orotund comes from the Latin word for 'with a round mouth' and was applied to very profuse speech and exaggerated eloquence.) His Tory opponent, Disraeli, scored off him with a neat squirting of Verboojuice when he called Gladstone 'a sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity'. This might have been put as 'an over-clever speaker, drunk with his own surfeit of words'. But, since Disraeli was making fun of a verbose man, he had a point when he did so with so much verbosity of his own.

Accordingly, the cry for short, Anglo-Saxon words should be duly respected but not rigidly obeyed. Speech and writing would become very dull if we were always strict abstainers from all verbosity. There are times and places for Verboojuice.

The case against indulgence in long words is much stronger when we come to consider the English used in government offices or in business houses. In both it has become the habit to call ordinary things by extraordinary names. In the official documents homes

These social and economic objectives can be achieved only on the basis of a substantial...
VOTE

become domiciles and food nutrition units. Things are not repaired but reconditioned; people are not healed but rehabilitated; sick folk are not sent to hospital, but declared cases suitable for hospitalization. The politicians are no less inclined to use unnecessary Latin forms. As I write, there is much talk of unilateral disarmament, chiefly with reference to nuclear weapons. Why not say one-sided instead of unilateral? Ends or purposes must be called objectives. One might expect the members of the Labour Party to speak and write more simply since they are appealing to those least likely to have had a classical education and to know their Latin. Yet statements of this kind come from that quarter. 'These social and economic objectives can be achieved only on the basis of a substantial measure of common ownership.' Common ownership for nationalization is well enough. But why objectives? Why 'on the basis of a substantial measure of' when all that is meant is 'with a good amount of'?

There is a special jargon of the political pamphlet as well as of the official form. In this not only do purposes become ultimate objectives, but events become phenomena. Phenomenon is a Greek word for that which appears and is seen: why people should take so much pleasure in calling happenings phenomena is hard to understand. This kind of Verboojuice has no real juice in it: it is a dry and sapless verbosity. But phenomena have been so popular that we have even created an adjective phenomenal to mean astonishing, an adjective which shows an ignorance of what the word means. 'The increase in the figures of juvenile

delinquency has been phenomenal.' Juvenile delinquent, both Latin words, is now the usual official English for a young law-breaker. The phrase may be used as a form of mercy: we are being kind when we talk like that. Juvenile delinquent is certainly more polite than young thug, and often it is a young thug who is so described. The use of the adjective phenomenal to mean vast or surprising is nonsensical. It should mean no more than apparent. This is a case of a long word for long word's sake. So is the favour shown to eventuality. Often one reads in English of this kind, 'in the eventuality of' something happening, when 'if' would do just as well instead.

Some of the pretentious terms used are a form of concealment. Politicians are naturally frightened of giving offence: they want to be popular and obtain votes. It is for this reason, I suppose, that we get the adjective under-privileged as a substitute for poor. I cannot see why the poor should object to being called poor: they are so described in the Bible and there is no disgrace in a failure to make money. Yet under-privileged has won a general use, although, if you examine it, the word is absurd. Privilege means private law, i.e., one law for the rich and another for the poor, which is admittedly bad and cannot be defended. Therefore in a good society there should be no such thing as privilege. The adjective under-privileged assumes that we all ought to have an equal share of privilege, which is absurd, since privilege means inequality.

Another classicism favoured by Communists, who are oddly addicted to long Latin words such as pro-

letariate, is liquidate. Just as the poor must be spared by calling them under-privileged, which is silly but not dangerous, the persecution and even the murder of political opponents must be covered up by calling it liquidation, which properly means causing to melt away. Those liquidated are usually described as reactionary elements and enemies of the people. (Element, used of people, is a favourite element of this jargon.) Reactionary is another long and ill-used Latin word. Reaction began life as a term used in physics, meaning 'the repulsion or resistance exerted by a body in opposition to the impact or pressure of another body'. When it is applied to human conduct a reactionary should be one who objects to and resists a code of morals or a social policy. Obviously resistance can take many forms. A person can resist or react against Conservatism as well as Socialism or Communism. So a politician of the Left who reacts against the Right can reasonably be called a reactionary. But he never is.

Reactionary has become a Left Wing term of abuse and its use has been extended to the arts. Those who believe themselves advanced think that they have disposed of those who do not keep up with their tastes by using words of this kind in place of argument. That has worked both ways in the past: the lovers of tradition dismissed the innovators with contemptuous reference to half-baked minds and callow presumption. Now the supporters of novelty retort with reactionary, fuddy-duddy, and the like. But throwing words about proves nothing and to tie the label

reactionary onto anything of which you disapprove is as ineffectual as it is easy. The word should describe opposition in general and not stupid opposition. One person can react as much against the abstract work of Picasso as another reacts against landscapes faithful to nature or portraits which can be recognised as pictures of a human being. A further irritating usage of reaction is to substitute it for opinion. People engaged in a Brains Trust or Quiz are constantly asked what is their reaction instead of what do they feel or think. Here again plain words like view or opinion would suffice. There is no need to turn to a Latin word fetched from a chemist's laboratory.

A particular pest of our time is the habit of adding -ology to the end of a word for no reason. This termination should mean the study of that to which it is attached: but this point is commonly forgotten and the three extra syllables are tacked on in a quite pointless way. A common instance is to be seen in the use of ideology. The dictionary definition of this is 'the science of ideas; the study of the nature and origin of ideas'. But now we are continually reading of so-and-so's political or economic ideology when all that is meant is political or economic ideas. The -ology in this case is quite useless: but it is liked and used, one must suppose, because it conveys an air of learning and profundity.

Methodology is another tiresome example of this kind. This is defined as 'the science of method or a treatise or dissertation on method'. But it is employed to mean no more than methods. One may see written

in a review of an artist's work that 'his methodology is seriously at fault'. Why does not the critic say that he does not like the way in which the artist works? Once more the -ology is a pompous waste of syllables. Since we are discussing words we may also consider the misuse of a word-word, phraseology. This originally signified a text-book containing phrases and a phrase is 'a small group of words expressing a single notion'. But phraseology has been misused to mean no more than a phrase or phrases. A turgid and muddled piece of writing is described as a mass of muddled phraseology when the word phrases would have been quite adequate. Terminology, a word already mentioned in connection with Sir Winston Churchill's jesting reply about a possible falsehood, is abused in the same manner. It should mean the study of terms which are 'words or phrases used in a definite or precise sense in some particular subject' and it has come to be used roughly as a name for all sorts of things. Terminology now is a substitute for terms. If a piece of writing is described as being full of 'barbarous terminology' the person who so describes it is himself using terms barbarously or at least with a futile cult of length.

In a volume of essays called *Shooting an Elephant* George Orwell had a shot at several other things too. One of the articles included is called 'Politics and the English Language'. In it he denounced several of the classicisms to which I have already objected. His dislikes included, in addition to these, individual (used as a noun for a person) and the adjective categorical. When a man exclaims 'I categorically deny' how often

does he know what that imposing adverb means? The same speaker will also use the pompous word category when he means a list. 'In the category of our immediate objectives' is his way of saying 'among our purposes'.

Category is a word which has come down from the metaphysical philosophy of the ancient Greek Aristotle 'whose ten categories or predicaments are a classification of all the manners in which assertions may be made of the subject'. To the ordinary English person that means very little: he does not know that a predicament is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'that which is predicted' (we could have guessed that) 'or asserted'. To him predicament has been extended to mean a dangerous state of affairs, or a mere muddle, which is suitable enough in this case. Thus categorically has come, by this strange route, to mean assertively. So, when the speaker bangs the table and shouts defiantly that he categorically asserts this or that, he is only saying that he assertingly asserts. What a needless piece of word-spinning lies in our uses of category and categorical!

Orwell objected to the dragging in of words which have become customary and mean very little. He was tired of basic, an adjective now commonly attached to beliefs, whether fundamental or not. Since his time basically has become a popular adverb with Brains Trust and Quiz panel-members. I frequently notice that people begin their answer with 'Basically, I think'. That sort of start is now as common as 'Actually, I think' is in general conversation. One hears, 'Do you

like London?'. 'Actually, I find it terrible.' These adverbs, categorically, basically, actually, are in fact doing nothing at all but taking up time or making unnecessary noise.

Orwell included in this essay a translation into the jargon now used by political writers of a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is a model of strong, simple, and brief writing:

> I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here is Orwell's version:

> Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

Orwell was ready to call that a parody. But was it really a parody? I do not think so: and I think it could be added to, without any unfairness to what is now being constantly written. Indeed, I would make a further suggestion. 'Success or failure' is too simple for the jargon-men. They might re-write this as: 'Optimum or inadequate performance in the trend of competitive activities.'

Optimum, the singular neuter form of the Latin adjective for best, has been adopted, both as noun and adjective, for use in the kind of English which can be called officialese and is less politely named by the Americans gobbledegook. Having just turned from my morning paper to write this I have noted that in a new Labour Party booklet the writers are seeking 'to determine the optimum dietary for present and future populations'. Why not say 'best food' or 'best diet'? If the authors want their advice to be read by the masses, are they likely to succeed if they use language so far from common use? What member of the public, rich or poor, ever says at home as he finishes a meal, 'Splendid. That has been most beneficial. This is optimum dietary'?

There has been a recent habit of using long Latin adjectives and then turning them into nouns. I am continually reading about a potential when all that is meant is force or power. Nothing is gained by saying that 'our defensive forces must have maximum potential' instead of 'must have the fullest power'. Another term that has crept in is a differential as a substitute for a difference. Differential is an adjective meaning that which shows difference; writing of differential wages for different jobs makes sense. But there is no need to turn a difference into a differential, a practice which has become common.

Why do people like long words when the short ones are there? Perhaps it gives a sense of importance to use in business or in writing for public reading a form of language which is not used at home or in ordinary

conversation. We would not, as I said, talk about optimum dietary in our own dining-rooms. Nor, I hope, would any normal man say to his wife, 'I would like a differential in my nutrition-units for breakfast tomorrow. I have an exacting day confronting me at the office and wish to be at optimum potential'. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that such things appear in official publications.

Journalists, especially when they are at work on leading articles, apparently feel that they are doing their job better if they are writing as they would never speak to a colleague in the office. For example, they will write, 'It behoves the Government to explore every avenue in the formulation of a differential policy'. But the man who put this on paper would use should or must instead of the antiquated behoves if he were discussing the matter with his editor. His remark would probably run, 'We must tell the Government to try every way to find a new plan'.

The craving for the long Latin term has shown itself in the constant use of executive for a director or boss. I see before me an advertisement of a holiday at sea offering 'Relaxed leisure for Executives'. Some years ago this would have been 'Quiet Holidays for Business Men'. But high-up business men do not like to be called that nowadays. They prefer to be known as Top-ranking Executives.

In the case of the top-ranking executive there is not only a pompous usage but a mistaken one. An executive is now generally the name applied to a man who directs and gives orders. But the word comes from the

Latin verb *exsequor*, meaning I follow out. Therefore an executive should be one who does what he is told. The correct meaning is kept when we talk of the executor of a dead man's will. His job is to carry out what the maker of the will ordered to be done. If he started to have ideas of his own and give his own orders as to the distribution of the money that has been left by the maker of the will, the executor would soon find himself in the dock of a law-court. The British Civil Service continues to use the adjective executive correctly: its Executive class carries into practice the policy laid down by the Administrative class. It is not made up of Top-ranking Executives who issue the commands. But Executive looks and sounds important and so it has become established as a term for Very Important People in the business world.

Adding to the length of a word has a curious and wide-spread attraction. Active verbs have nouns to express what they do or create. To press produces pressure: then somebody begins to use a new verb, pressurise, which means no more than press. A journalist, writing on politics, will say that criticism among its supporters has pressurised the Government into altering its plans. The extra syllable is useless: but it is often there. An extreme instance of this occurs in the case of the word sign. He who signs makes a signature and now one can see that a book or film-script has been signatured by so-and-so, while 'with Mr A.'s authority' is lengthened into 'carrying the authorisation of Mr A.'.

It must be repeated that long words are not bad in

themselves. There are subjects and situations which seem to demand them and there have been periods in the history of our language when the culture and educational methods of the time provided an audience and a reading public to whom words of Latin derivation were normal. Dr Johnson evidently believed that the company to whom he spoke was ready for his inspissation of gloom and anfractuosity of the mind. During the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth quotations from Latin prose and poetry were often used in Parliamentary debates: the belief that all members fully understood them may have been too hopeful, but it was rightly assumed that most would see the point. Now that assumption would be absurd. Quotations of this kind are no longer used.

It is therefore all the more absurd that, while avoiding good Latin, we should burden ourselves with long Latin terms where Anglo-Saxon brevity will do quite well, especially in directions issued by officials to guide the public. Yet one finds reforms costing more described as 'incurring additional expenditure'. This habit, incidentally, does itself 'incur additional expenditure' since lengthy writing is used in the advertising of jobs in the public service. The more space taken by the announcement in the papers the more this will cost. Public bodies now waste thousands of pounds in this way. Instead of saying that capable and responsible doctors are wanted a Borough Council 'invites applications from registered medical practitioners who have had wide experience of public health administration and are capable of assuming full

responsibility for departmental supervision', and so on to a swollen, and, at advertising rates, very costly series of paragraphs. Much advice given to us is so turgid as merely to darken counsel or, as some might now say, inspissate the apprehending faculties.

Accordingly let us keep the big word for the big moment or big theme which suits it. There are pleasures to be found in Mr Polly's Verboojuice and it would be dull if no verbal flourishes were ever allowed. The thing to avoid is the long word for the simple thing. Here is a brief list of some longer terms with their short alternatives which deserves to be considered:

commence	begin
initiate	begin
terminate or finalise	end
continue	go on
in the present circumstances	as things are
with reference to	as to or about
correspondence	letters
reaction	view
domicile	home
phenomena	events
in the eventuality of	if
appropriate	right
infringement	breach
expansion	growth
regulations	rules
obligations	duties

Anybody can make his own list of the tiresome Longs and the useful Shorts.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN WORDS WEAR OUT

Words are implements. They are vehicles used for relating news; they are the simple machinery needed to make our needs felt; and they are the sometimes delicate and sometimes violent weapons employed in the exchange and conflicts of opinion. It is the nature of all tools to become weak or blunt with steady usage, and words are being uttered or written all the time: naturally they lose their edge and their power, and they cannot be sent back to be sharpened.

There are various ways of avoiding this linguistic fatigue. A common method is to exaggerate, by introducing a stronger and more urgent term than the occasion demands. One has only to glance at a newspaper to see that process at work. The writers of newspapers, particularly the most popular papers, are eager to make the common-place events of an ordinary day seem exciting and worth writing about. This is inevitable, since people will not want to read reports that suggest dullness. The journalists are driven by their editors, who are driven by the public to make the news seem colourful even if it is really rather grey. It has to be remembered that the Press is part of the Industry of Entertainment. People want their papers to wake them up and excite and amuse as well as to say what occurred. The responsibility for this artificial heigh-

tening of interest must be shared between writers and readers.

One result of this is the employment of what may be called Urgency Words. These can be noticed at any time in a wide variety of papers. For example, if help is being given, it is rarely just sent: it is always described as rushed, although the speed of its arrival may have been slight enough. An aeroplane carrying supplies to people cut off is called a 'mercy plane', which is supposed to add a touch of romance. To say that a thing has started does not sound note-worthy. So recently the newspaper reader has been repeatedly informed that an event or series of events has been sparked off or triggered off, although there was no suggestion of an explosion or a gun-shot in the events that occurred. These Urgency Words do no particular harm to the language, but they can look foolish if applied to happenings completely unsuitable, which sometimes occurs. I read not long ago that the floods in a certain town had been triggered off by the melting snow. A thunder-storm might be said to spark off a flood, since a flash of lightning is involved. But triggering off a deluge can only suggest a gigantic water-pistol at work in the sky, and that is absurd.

In the effort to make the happenings of the day appear entertaining and exciting, the writers of the news and especially of the head-lines set above the news are driven as a matter of course to use words of strong impact and dramatic significance. The amount of strong drama in what took place may not justify the strength of the language, if strict accuracy is to be the

only consideration. So a minor dispute will emerge as never less than a clash and an unexpected decision by the Government will be announced as a political bomb-shell. (The continual emergence of the bomb-shell is evidence of journalists' conservatism as well as of a search for additional emphasis, since there is no such thing; bombs there are and shells there are, but only journalists know of bomb-shells.) So it goes on. People and things cannot be simply chosen or shown: a picture of immensely careful scrutiny must be suggested. So they must be hand-picked and pin-pointed. Expenditure is not allowed to be cut: it must be slashed. One begins to visualise the Chancellor of the Exchequer preparing the annual Budget with a flashing sword in his right hand. Political disputes and spoken attacks on Ministers are described in terms of physical violence in order to gain dramatic importance. We read of statesmen being flayed by their opponents in Parliament.

Children naturally have their own range of Urgency Words. These are found mostly in matters of appreciation, since the terms used to express delight have to be kept new and vigorous. Both courtesy and gratitude are at work in this case. Fifty years ago a boy would express his thanks for some outing or entertainment by calling it ripping. That was a really vivid adjective when first employed. Ripping! The thing which it described was seen tearing its way through the bounds of the ordinary. But when a verbal image of this kind has been made familiar it is bound to lose its force along with its novelty and so ripping no longer pro-

vided a vision of a spectacular break-away from the normal. Later the young idea invented or took over from adults the more recent terms of approval. What had been ripping became the super, the wizard, and the smashing. These too naturally grow tired and will have to be succeeded. At the time of writing, with space-travel achieving new possibilities, the wonders of the sputnik seem to be helping, since I have just heard 'It's a rocket' used as an indication of the highest praise.

Somewhat kindred to the schoolboy's or schoolgirl's desire to find new words of praise is the necessity of the salesman, or of the advertiser who is the salesman's spokesman, to discover fresh ways of commendation. The pressure on our language is here very great because there is an ever-increasing tendency to proclaim the merits of goods for sale as widely and as persuasively, if not as loudly, as possible. Just as the journalist who is recounting news or passing comment upon news is driven to seek for Urgency Words in order to avoid the appearance of flatness in what he writes, so the advertiser, now everywhere so busily employed, has to seek Urgency Words in his own field of sales-promotion. The business of extolling the goods for which he is engaged to run a sales-campaign necessitates much reliance on adjectives of a kind that will appear to recommend the articles in question in a most graphic and striking way.

This means that words which once had some compelling lustre and a power to allure the purchaser are worked to death. An obvious example of that is

GLAMOUR
Pencil Slim
DREAM
De Luxe
DAIRY
SUPER
FRESH

glamorous: glamour was an old Scottish word for magic, and, if pronounced as glam-oor with the accent on the second syllable, it looked and sounded just right for suggesting the strange fascination and the spell-binding quality that it was chosen to describe. But if glamour is reduced in sound to 'glammer' and then applied as a matter of course to every kind of supposed attraction, it must be robbed of its original mystery and magnetism. Once a genuine Urgency word of the story-teller – Sir Walter Scott used glamour with great effect – it has been killed by all the drudgery it has had to do.

No less vulnerable has been the adjective fabulous which has recently been tagged on to every kind of appeal to the customer. As a favourite word of those with something to sell it is a curious choice because the dictionary definition of a fable is 'a narrative or statement not founded on fact, a myth or legend, a foolish story, a fabrication, a falsehood'. So when a salesman announces a fabulous offer, he is, if accuracy of meaning be insisted on, really making a deceitful offer and offering a very bad bargain. But fabulous is one of those words which has changed its meaning. Following the dictionary one can still talk of a fabulous monster and mean by the choice of adjective that there was never any such creature. But to be told of a fabulous play or film or invited to enjoy a fabulous holiday on a fabulous coast is to be given news which the teller believes will be not only immensely attractive but also confidently believed. Under pressure, a number of words change their meaning. Fabulous is one of those.

It has shed the idea of falsity and now means something of remarkably fine quality.

One has only to read advertisements with care, especially those in the lush women's magazines, to see how desperately the writers of the advertisements are striving to find new ways of expressing rapturous admiration: sometimes they manage to create ingenious images, as when they commend a whisper-light fabric for a pencil-slim figure. But the daily grind of turning out a novel phrase defeats even the craftiest of the craftsmen. The principal successors to glamorous and fabulous were breath-taking and out-of-this-world, and they in turn have become routine terms. Dream has been turned into an adjective. Consequently, the housewife, having been equipped with all the gleaming gadgets of a dream kitchen, is invited to escape from its labour-saving splendours by taking a dream vacation, possibly with a dream cruise. When one comes across another of these invitations to a dream purchase it is possible to wonder whether all dreams come true. There may be nightmares.

It is amusing to watch the Urgency Words coming and going: as I write, I note the continual reliance on farm-fresh in praise of much that is bought at the dairy or the grocers. But farm-fresh soon becomes word-stale. A great deal of ingenuity is employed by the advertising profession in the wearisome task of keeping their words of persuasion alive and as nearly urgent as may be. But time rubs and tarnishes the once bright surface of such language until it is dimmed by this hard usage and suffers from exhaustion. And in the

end it may be true that a quite simple slogan can be more effective and better able to hold its own over a long period than all the clever word-contrivance of the ingenious writers of advertising 'copy'. 'Players, please' is the kind of phrase that sticks, and probably did more good for the article in question than any calculated announcement of aromatic bliss from a packet of the same.

The English language is used without cease all over the world and that world is increasingly exposed to the pressures of advertisement and propaganda. J. B. Priestley invented two words to describe this state of affairs – and how excellent it is to have somebody inventing additions to the dictionary! His new terms are Admass and Propmass. An Admass society is one in which the advertiser has great power to shape the habits of the time, moulding the taste which leads to sales, stimulating a sense of affluent well-being through the bargains it offers and therefore creating a receptive attitude in the public. Propmass is his name for a social condition, chiefly to be found under dictatorships, in which the minds of the people are conditioned and controlled by official propaganda until they consider themselves fortunate to be living in such a splendid community.

In Great Britain and the United States people are more exposed to Admass than to Propmass. Behind the Iron Curtain Propmass dominates. In both cases the constant outpouring of certain words wears them down and makes the vocabulary of praise a mortuary where words lie in melancholy rows, dead or dying.

What less glamorous than glamour now? What more faded than fabulous? What less democratic than 'a people's democracy' as understood by the Communists? Nobody now can derive a thrill from seeing the adjective thrilling on a poster which proclaims the excitements of a play or a film. So little do the users of that word now rely on its potency that they may try to increase its value by the feeble addition of 'super'. I have seen an announcement of 'a film with a thousand super-thrills' and I have also seen certain ladies of the stage called 'super-super-glamourettes'.

Another word that has been stripped of its impact is sensation. Originally signifying a feeling of any kind it was later applied chiefly to feelings of surprise or horror and the adjective sensational was attached only to supposedly exciting or astonishing events. But does anyone stand aghast in the street if he sees 'Film Star: Sensation' on a news-bill? It may only mean that she has been separated from a few of her diamonds by a burglar or from her fourth husband by his fifth successor. Yet thrill once conveyed the idea of a serious physical distress with an onset of shivers and shakes. When Charlotte Brontë wrote of 'thrilling pains in the body' the adjective was still fresh enough and strong enough to indicate considerable agony; and long before that thrill, as Shakespeare understood and employed it, was a word intended to evoke violent emotion.

When Juliet is about to take Friar Lawrence's powerful potion and is naturally terrified of taking the great risk, she exclaims:

A faint cold fear thrills through my veins
That almost freezes up the heat of life.

Thrill was elsewhere associated with the menace of a frozen world. Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, confronted with the prospect of his execution, has a nightmare vision of what may happen to his soul, which he fears may be burned in fiery floods or condemned to reside 'in thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice'.

So it is not only the words chosen to describe great pleasure or great excitement that have lost their dynamic quality. The terms suggesting gripping apprehension and alarm have also succumbed to hard usage. Awful was once a word of powerful menace: it conveyed, as well as the compulsion to feel reverent wonder, the implication of things vast and fearsome. In Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity' we read that

Kings sat still with awful eye
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

For Shakespeare 'awful men' were not nasty fellows, as we might think. They were men holding right authority and commanding respect and obedience. In the eighteenth century awful could be applied to imposing ruins or wild, romantic scenery. But now to call any thing, perhaps a meal, awful means only that we do not like it and the adverb awfully has declined into an alternative for very. 'I'm awfully sorry I couldn't come, I was feeling awful' is probably just an ordinary excuse and apology for non-appearance caused by a

cold or head-ache. The idea of reverent awe has vanished. Fearful has suffered a similar decline. It was used of acutely frightened persons or genuinely frightening things. Today we can talk of a trivial remark as fearfully silly. As with awfully we are using a substitute for very.

Horrid is another adjective in this class of words which have been reduced by fatigue to an extreme exhaustion. The Latin *horridus* meant bristling, and bristling things or animals can be extremely frightening or fearful in the old sense. The people of two centuries ago, who disliked wild scenery, spoke of mountain peaks that went bristling into the sky as horrid. Hair that stood bristling on end was horrid and this condition could be caused by a horrid spectacle. But now we can say that the road to the once horrid mountains is a horrid one simply because it makes rough walking or driving; our horrid journeys are only uncomfortable ones. When Boswell was driving with Dr Johnson on their journey to Scotland and the Hebrides he described their alarm on a dark night on the Great North Road when robbers were said to be about. He called this information 'a horrid idea'. He had the old hair-raising apprehension in mind. Obviously the word meant far more to him than it does to us. Time has tired it out.

We try to achieve language of great urgency by talking of a shattering experience: but there again the wastage of strength has occurred. If a boy or a girl at a party tells us that something was quite shattering, he or she may only mean that they disliked it. We do

not visualise a state of collapse and physical disintegration. In the same way one of the words of highest praise has been applied to small matters. If the same person at a party, having recovered from her shattering, says that a play or book or a meal was simply divine, or even too divine, we only know that she approved of it warmly. We do not have notions of some heavenly miracle.

The fact is that language cannot stand up to overwork any better than our bodies or our machines do. We do not keep the blood running in the arteries of the Urgency Words if we submit them to excessive labour and exploitation. Pernicious anaemia sets in. Accordingly we now have, if we can, to discover new sources of vitality in our verbal equipment. We may not be able to give new life to words that are moribund, but it may be possible to draw on words that have been laid aside or forgotten. We can, to some extent, find new terms to enrich the exhausted stock. That is what slang is constantly trying to do and we must not despise the contribution that slang can make to correct English. We may also draw on dialect words which are not too local or too strange. We live in a world of constant innovations in the machinery of life and this requires a new vocabulary which we must try to make readily intelligible as well as adequate to the articles in view. We have to 'mind our language', as the saying goes, and that now means that we must do our best to mend it and remake it.

CHAPTER FOUR

SLANG

Language is there for our use; it is also a source of our pleasure since the tools that we use ought to be so well made that we enjoy the handling of them. Language is more than an inheritance. Because it must renew itself it is also an opportunity. While we cut away the parts of it that are faded and get rid of the dead growth, we must do some planting of our own, stuff with life in it, Verboojuice.

A number of new words arrive with the label Slang, and precise people are apt to dismiss slang completely as a rough and ugly addition to, or perversion of, Correct English. But this matter needs thought and we must look into the various kinds and sources of slang before we dismiss it with a look of total disdain.

First, let us consider the word itself. Slang, applied to speech, means words slung or thrown about. People are usually happy when they throw things around. That, I suppose, is why the habit came in of saying 'Let's throw a party' instead of merely giving it. 'Chucking things about' can be a harmless, as well as popular, activity if one picks up the mess, does not leave litter, and omits to break the milk-bottle after the picnic, a custom deplorably popular, as may be seen at any beauty-spot or in our parks and common lands after a holiday.

Proofs of this kind of joy are to be seen in our words expressing delight. Chuck, which may be called slang or slightly slangy when used for throw, has had a variety of meanings and they are pleasant ones. A chuck became a term of endearment, says the *Oxford Dictionary*, in 1588, which was about the time that Shakespeare came to London and began his career as a writer. He used chuck for darling and since then many chucks have been affectionately chucked under the chin: a chuck was also a chicken and a butcher's name for a large cut of beef, agreeable things in the larder. So when people began to chuck or sling their language, they could be regarded as having fun with it or, in the slang of our time, 'doing it for kicks'.

One of the main causes of slang is the desire to avoid monotony. Consequently things which are very commonly used and mentioned have been given a wide range of slang names. When one of these names becomes very common, the public gives it up, as children give up toys or women their fashions, and finds another. The word money, for example, has had a great number of slang substitutes. When I was a boy we said 'Have you any tin on you?', but I fancy that tin is hardly ever used now. But the North Country has stuck to brass. Then came oof, which you will come across in the stories of P. G. Wodehouse. This had a German origin.

Next there was 'the boodle', probably from budget which was a purse, and possibly helped by a confusion with the booty of a thief. Oodles of boodle may have come from huddle, wealth being huddled away for

protection. The money-slang comes streaming along, spondulics, the dibs, the ready, first quids and then nickers for pounds, and so on. Recently 'the lolly' has been favourite, a shortening of the sweet that was called a lollipop. The list of slang-names for being drunk would fill half a page if I started to write them all down, including American as well as English.

This eagerness not to use the same word over and over again is surely acceptable and even worthy of praise. The makers of slang are often using some imagination and that is why slang has been called 'the poetry of the people'. One of the chief elements of poetry is the striking use of metaphor. A metaphor is a verbal image transferred from one object to another with the purpose of making us see it in another light and so getting an illuminating or, in the case of slang, a striking or amusing view of it. Joseph Addison wrote of 'Those beautiful metaphors in Scripture where life is termed a Pilgrimage'. That is scarcely a bold metaphor, certainly not as bold as that which calls a clergyman a sky-pilot. The latter may be dismissed as slang, whereas to call a clergyman a guide to heaven would pass as correct English. Yet sky-pilot is more vivid and is not impolite.

Slang then can be an exercise of fancy. John Masefield has called red roses 'those blood-drops from the burning heart of June', a powerful metaphor: but there is a vividness of imagery in calling a corpse a stiff. That would be dismissed, no doubt, as slang and coarse slang too. But it is extremely difficult to say where slang begins. Many words which were once

slang and may have been called vulgar have risen in the world and become respectable, dictionary words. Nobody nowadays would get a bad mark for using the word mob of a crowd; but it was once slang, having been shortened from the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus*, meaning the shifting or fickle multitude. Shortening of long words or hyphened words is first thought of as slang and then accepted. Nobody now objects to speaking of a piano, instead of pianoforte: indeed, a person who used the latter form would be thought somewhat pedantic.

There is an interesting example of a slang usage which has become respectable in another language. The proper Latin word for head was *caput*, which we keep in the adjective capital. But the slang Latin was *testa*, meaning a pot or shell, and that has been kept and made correct and respectable by the Italians as *testa* and by the French as *tête*. In English we have had several similar slang words for the same thing. Nut was very common and there was napper too, often used in the phrase 'a tap on the napper'. Now both appear to have been superseded by loaf. But none of these became orthodox English. It would not do to write in an essay about a clever person that he uses his loaf. Loaf may come from the look of the old cottage-loaf or from rhyming-slang, since head rhymes with bread and loaf of bread can so become loaf. Meanwhile the Frenchman can utilise his *tête* without realising that he is drawing on Roman slang and employing his pot or shell.

Wherever we turn we find words which are moving up from slang to respectability or else sliding in the

other direction. In one of Ben Jonson's less known works I discovered 'beat it' meaning hurry off. He wrote of beating it down the cobbled street and one can see that he was using a good metaphor to express the clatter of hooves and heels. But to tell somebody to beat it is now as slangy as to tell them to scarper. The reverse process can be seen in such a word as flippant. It is now normal to dismiss easy jocularity as flippancy; but the adjective flip meaning nimble was once applied to jesting in a way thought rather low. Then there is the case of flabbergasted, derived from flappy or flabby and aghast. Our ancestors would have called this slang, but I think it is now permitted in Correct English. But to be 'in a flap', that is to say to be worried and confused, is scarcely accepted, although you may find in serious journalism the announcement that some party leaders are 'in a flap' or that the Prime Minister is 'unflappable'. Flummoxed, to describe the same condition of doubt and anxiety, was used by Dickens, but he put it on the lips of Mr Weller whose talk was Cockney slang. 'If your governor don't prove a alleybi, he'll be what the Italians call reg'larly flummoxed.' The attribution to Italy is odd. Perhaps flummoxed, like flabbergasted, has moved upwards in recent times.

Crook, for a swindler, a doer of crooked deeds, came to us as American slang, but it is now so well established in English that it has won general acceptance. None the less, it might not be regarded favourably in an essay on a historical subject if a king were described as a crook, however bad his conduct. Yet I have seen

crook used with great effect in a serious and moving little poem by John Betjeman called 'In a Bath Teashop'. He is describing lovers holding hands and looking with seeming adoration into each others' eyes,

She, such a very ordinary woman;
He, such a thumping crook.

He then adds that, because of their devoted rapture, they seem 'little lower than the angels' as they sit there 'in the tea-shop's ingle-nook'. Thumping for big is undoubtedly slang, but its presence, with crook, surely helps the emotional impact of the episode thus pictured. If Betjeman had kept to Correct English and written:

She, such a very ordinary woman;
He, such a scheming knave.

the reader would be much less touched. The introduction of everyday and slangy words is just right in this poem to convey the pathos of the very ordinary woman in the Olde Oake Tearoom surroundings as she is led up the garden by the thumping crook. To describe a person as led up the garden is to fall into slang, I suppose, but it is a phrase that has earned its common usage because the garden suggests the innocence of flowers or an Eden in which a serpent lurks.

So in this sea of language there are always cross-currents at work, on which words drift from one meaning or one grade to another. That which was frowned upon is carried into favour and the mistake is so far forgiven as to be accepted. The words for

mistake themselves provide examples of this tendency. The most solemn of these is solecism taken from the Greek: this began as an impropriety of speech, then was applied to a breach of manner, and later has been used of any kind of mistake. But few English people would in normal conversation talk of somebody committing a solecism. The term has stayed scholastic. If they did not simply say that the person made a mistake they could easily pass into a kind of slang which is now hardly to be classed as slang and has its own vividness of metaphor.

We allude to dropping a brick, with its painful intimation of clumsiness and damaged toes, or to committing a howler (usually in a school-room), with its suggestion that the mistake was bad enough to scream to heaven for correction, or to making a clanger, with its echo of a blunder ringing out like a bell. In a letter from Canada I have noted a boner for a mistake.

Solecism remains dull, whereas imagery of this slangy kind adds to the communicating power of language. The strict may remain faithful to Greek solecism, Latin error, or French faux pas, but these terms do not seem to the average man to announce sufficiently the folly, mischance, or absurdity of the mistake: so the bricks are dropped, the howler howls, and the clanger clangs. What had been slang gradually floats into a higher class, which reminds me that a floater was at one time much used, at least in College and University society, as another term for a stupid or tactless word or action. But I think floater was never widely known.

Mention of educational bodies is a reminder that these, like all social groupings, have had their own kind of slang and that items of that slang have risen to become respectable. To say that a student was ploughed in his exam is now English that passes the test of correctness. Pluck was another term for the same calamity. The candidate, thus imagined, was, if ploughed, ground into the soil like an old weed or, if plucked, stripped of his plumage or perhaps gutted. Pluck, meaning courage, was once slang and the exact equivalent of guts, which has remained slang. Pluck was an old word for the entrails of an animal, presumably because they were plucked out. Nowadays one does not often hear of an examinee being plucked. But pluck as a noun for tenacity and hardihood has entered the ranks of Correct English, whereas guts, though often used in talk, has not reached that respectability.

There was an old English word flunk which meant give up, fall back, fail utterly. We have let it go, but the Americans have kept it, as they have kept so many old English words, like fall for autumn, or old English usages, like gotten for got. In American books of today one constantly reads of students flunking their exams. In English we see and hear 'He failed his French or maths'. This is incorrect, since the pupil does not fail a subject; he fails in it. But the habit is so general as to get a pass degree.

There is a curious term used in at least two Scottish Universities for what the English call a freshman or fresher. The student in his or her first year is known as

a Bejant or Bejan. Owing to the old Alliance of Scotland and France a number of French words have been embedded in Scottish speech, such as ashet (*assiette*) for plate, and jiggot (*gigot*) for a leg of mutton. The Bejan is explained as a form of *bec jaune*, the yellow beak of a newly hatched bird or nestling. Scholastic slang, like all slang, wears out. Fifty years ago at Oxford there was a silly habit of ending numbers of words with -agger or sounds like that. The Prince of Wales, now Duke of Windsor, then an undergraduate, was called the Pragger-Wagger and, if the Prince had thrown a note into the waste-paper basket, he would, in this slang, have tossed it into the Wagger-Pagger-Bagger. This use has dwindled and no harm in that. Good slang is based on striking metaphor not on slurring speech, mere abbreviation, and tricks like calling Eggs and Bacon Eggers and Baggers.

Sports and games have made plentiful additions to slang. The pawn, the lowest-ranking piece in chess, was originally so called because a pawn was a foot-soldier. In the age of chivalry, when a gentleman had to be proudly mounted, the infantry did not count for much. (The word infantry, incidentally, signified youngsters, infants in the eyes of the High Command, like infants in the eye of the Law.) The military aspect of the foot-slogging pawn has been forgotten and he became a synonym for an unimportant person or thing, a pawn in the game of life. The other kind of pawn, a pledge, or, as a verb, to get money in return for a pledged article, is a quite different word of German origin. The English used popping as a slang

form of pawning when they were hard up, which is a queer term for poor when you come to look at it. Then they took their goods to Uncle, the pawn-broker, and popped them or put them up the spout. Poverty has naturally created a lingo of its own because it has wrongly involved shame and people like to use rather evasive terms to describe it or the conditions and actions which it involves. They would rather be skinned (now skint) than merely pauperised or poor. In this connection I have already alluded to the use of under-privileged.

Returning to games we find some truly inventive language in their various jargons. Why do people call no score love when they play tennis? (The cry 'Love All' is especially queer when two would-be champions who are not exactly fond of each other are engaged in a long and arduous match.) The answer is that playing for love meant playing for no stakes and with no bet on the result. Hence love came to mean nothing. Deuce, at forty-all, was thus named because two more points had to be won in succession. The deuce, two, is a low throw at dice and was accordingly hated. Hence the Deuce for the Devil.

Cricket has created its own imaginative slang, some of which was once much employed by journalists writing about it when it was the fashion to find alternative names for the various items of the game. They would call the wickets the timber-yard, and the wicket-keeper the timber-watcher, which was ingenious, the bat and ball the leather and the willow, which was obvious, and a ball which kept low and shot

along the ground a daisy-cutter, which showed a touch of fancy. I have always admired the word googly applied to a ball bowled with a hand-movement suggesting one kind of twist or break on bouncing but so contrived as to make just the opposite turn. Googly is a really expressive word for this slow, deceitful delivery.

And so it goes on. Social groups like to have a language of their own and professions always develop a technical vocabulary in which slang may play a part. Some Air Force slang worked its way into common speech during the last war. We may wonder why and by whom 'shooting a line' was invented to describe talking of or boasting of one's achievements: the inventor did evidently hit the mark since the phrase became generally popular. Those engaged in dubious or illegal practices have been great users of slang, in some cases, no doubt, because they thought it prudent to have a more or less secret language of their own. But, apart from any crafty planning of code-words for criminals, there seems to be a common pleasure in having a club lingo or a trade jargon. To have such a special possession creates an atmosphere of mystery and of special knowledge. That, I surmise, is why doctors continue to write their prescriptions for medicine in Latin, thus trusting to the classical scholarship of the chemists who have to interpret the Latin, as well as some often squiggly hand-writing, and make up the dose correctly. Latin cannot be called doctors' slang, but ways of speech or writing which are limited to people of one calling are half-way to

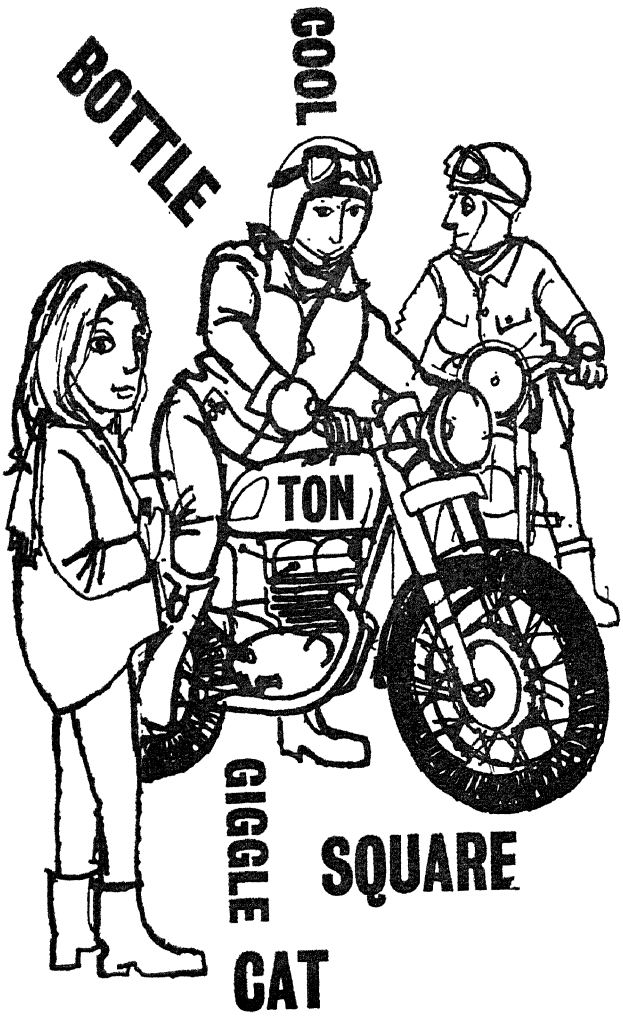
slang and in the case of criminals completely and vividly slang.

That jargon has come right down from Elizabethan times when the pick-pockets of the town were called nips and foists and the swindlers were coney-catchers or hunters of the human rabbit. As this language was built up it showed some richness of metaphor. Horse-thieves became priggers of prancers. Some of our historic criminals' slang went over to America and has come back to us with life renewed. A striking example of that is phoney for false or bogus: it began in English as fawney which described a false use of metal, such as faking brass to look like gold. Why fawney was altered into phoney is hard to say, but it is generally agreed that, if somebody, when blamed, is accused of making phoney excuses, the telephone has nothing to do with it and we are going far back into the records of deception.

Phoney has not yet been promoted to Correct English, but bogus will pass and that was a slang word derived from the root bog which occurs in words for goblins such as boggart which survives in northern dialects. Criminals may talk of doing a job: and so, of course, may many other people: the word job is probably derived from the old English word jobbe meaning a lump. So a job was first of all slang for a substantial piece of work and it may still be considered not quite Correct English for a task. If a student wrote in his history papers that the Duke of Wellington was appointed to defeat Napoleon Bonaparte and did the job or made a good job of it he might win the disapproval

of some examiners. But to use jobbery to describe corruption by the giving of jobs and to say that eighteenth-century politicians were guilty of jobbery on a grand scale would be accepted as Standard English. That is another case of the odd ways in which slang works. Jobbery has been promoted, whereas job has not. Full employment is the Correct English: jobs for all is not quite as respectable as work for all. There is one use of job which is as silly as it has been common, that is to talk of 'a job of work'. That is just idle repetition of two words which mean the same thing. It is hard to imagine why it became so common.

The rhyming slang, more prevalent in Cockney talk than elsewhere in England, is no better than a pointless trick, a seeking of variety for variety's sake. The game is to find a rhyme for the article in mind and then use the rhyme instead of the ordinary name, i.e. bees and honey for money, or trouble-and-strife for wife. Sometimes there is some elementary aptness introduced, since money may be deemed sweet and a wife troublesome and quarrelsome. But to call a look a butcher's hook seems to me only tiresome and cumbrous. Slang usually shortens, as in telly for television, but here it lengthens. There can be more shortening, e.g. by substituting 'have a butcher's' for 'have a look', which is silliness again. I cannot see any of the real merit of slang, its play of fancy and use of metaphor, in saying, 'Go up the apples and pears and get your nanny' when what is meant is 'go up the stairs and get your coat'. Goat, it must be explained, rhymes with coat, so nanny goat stands for coat. Then the goat


BOTTLE
COOL
TON
GIGGLE
SQUARE
CAT

is dropped and nanny remains. What sort of sense or fun can be found in this verbal jugglery?

It is very difficult to give precise rulings about the use of slang because the name covers such a wide range of words and phrases which have various degrees of correctness. Almost every day one can see words climbing up to acceptance. The new slang changes rapidly. At the time of writing a person with serious tastes was an egg-head or a square. His opposite type, together with his cats (kindred spirits), called the kind of things and situations which they enjoyed bottle and cool. If they went out on what used to be called a spree they were out for kicks or off on a giggle. If they were going for a giggle with speed-crazy owners of motor-cycles they expected the rider to do a ton, which meant a hundred miles an hour. I have put this in the past tense because in a year or two a totally fresh set of words for these things may have arrived among those who once were cats. For example, the shoes worn by girls for a giggle had stiletto heels which well described their height and sharpness while the boys had winkle-pickers, which gave a vivid idea of a long and pointed toe.

So really it is impossible to say what is slang or what was slang and has ceased to be slang. The same thing happened to the billycock hat which became a correct term after being a jesting one. Why one slang word becomes approved and another does not is a mystery. To describe a magistrate or a school-master as a beak because he noses into one's affairs seems fair enough. But nobody writing a serious article on police courts or

education would introduce the short, simple, and graphic beak.

We constantly are made to realise that slang is based on ingenious comparisons as in the case of winkle-picker, and therefore it can assist the necessary growth and change of language which we have to enlarge and enrich as well as to watch. But it remains dangerous to use it on formal occasions, that is to say in school-work or in applications for employment. It would be absurd to risk losing a prize or a post by letting slang, however vivid, get into one's writing. A few examiners might welcome a little slangy freshness amid the routine phrases in which we 'discuss the character of Hamlet or Brutus', 'trace the influence' of one author on another, or 'estimate the effects' of an economic or political event. But, even with such liberal judges, it would not be rewarding to write that when William the Conqueror put the kibosh on Harold at Hastings the army scarpered. (Kibosh has a Yiddish origin and was taken up by speakers of Cockney. Scarper has been explained as rhyming slang coming from a once famous naval base, Scapa Flow. Flow rhymes with go; then drop the flow and keep the scapa or scarper, just as butcher's hook for look loses the hook and keeps the butcher's in the remark 'Let's have a butcher's' for 'Let's have a look'.)

Slang of that kind may or may not be entertaining, according to taste. But it will certainly result in the ploughing, plucking, and flunking already mentioned. Even if the slang be on the edge of Correct English, it may not reach an examiner who approves the taking of

liberties. 'Safety first' is not a good rule in all the activities of life, but it is sound advice amid the grind of examinations as well as amid the traffic of the road.

At the same time groups of people, whether linked by sameness of age, occupation, or recreation, are sure to have their own special words and phrases. These may be properly enjoyed and added to in a creative, imaginative way during the course of day-to-day gossip or in the talking of professional 'shop'. In such company there is no need to be primly conservative in one's choice of a vocabulary. Slang which reveals a quick eye for a piece of imagery and which conveys that glimpse in a striking phrase may well be contributing to the Correct English of tomorrow: what once was severely marked as a solecism begins to 'get by' and passes unnoticed even by those with the strictest ideas of what is right and proper in a serious piece of writing.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIALECT

When Standard English was established in the south and centre of England, and with it a more or less standard system of speech and pronounciation, the rest of the country retained its own ways of talking, that is to say local accents, and also many local words; and especially the accents remain. This survival has been surprising to those who thought that the spread of education and the coming of radio and television to an almost nation-wide public would have the effect of wiping out these differences. Yet the accents of counties and districts and even of individual towns have proved astonishingly persistent: but local word-usage or dialect English has not put up an equally strong resistance to the unifying process.

Against the maintenance of separate accents several forces have been at work. There was a certain pride of class which made people feel that they were not only keeping up with the Smiths and the Joneses but going ahead of them if they spoke with the standard Southern intonations as used by the radio announcers. Further it was believed that it would be easier to get employment in business or the professions if the speaker conformed to the Southern mode. Consequently many people have taken speech-lessons from teachers of elocution in order to express themselves in

what they thought, no doubt correctly, was the expected way. Certainly it was prudent in certain cases to bring one's manner of speaking into line with the general practice; an actor or actress may profitably have a Scottish, Welsh, Western, North Country, or a Cockney accent in reserve for parts which occasionally need them, but it is essential to speak in the standard way in most of their work and especially if they want to appear in the kind of plays called classical.

The popular success of America in the world of films and of light entertainment has not only made American accents familiar: it has also made them much imitated. American-type speech of American slang is commonly heard in the streets and those who set out to be 'pop' singers nearly always assume trans-Atlantic intonations as they utter the routine set of words that are dignified with the name of lyrics. That will doubtless continue, but the fact remains that among the majority of the working people in England the diversity of accents stubbornly remains. The inhabitants of great cities as close to each other as Manchester and Liverpool and Edinburgh and Glasgow make widely different noises when they are carrying on a normal conversation. In Edinburgh and Eastern Scotland, for example, there is a high-pitched way of speaking and sometimes the words seem to come out of the top of the head, while in Glasgow, with its lower notes, the words seem to come up out of the chest or even the stomach; a stranger in Scotland who has been accustomed to the Edinburgh accent may be altogether puzzled by the sounds that he hears

in working-class Glasgow. All over England there re-remain great varieties of accent: there is little in common if we go from Devon to Birmingham and then on to Yorkshire and Tyneside.

To me this seems an excellent thing since it avoids monotony and gives a lively freshness to the sound of our language. It is to be hoped that class-pride and professional caution will not be able wholly to over-ride local diction although one must admit the convenience of having a command of Standard English pronunciation as well. I think that the eagerness to conform is now dwindling: there was a time when a Scot who wished to advance his career and came to England was anxious to be rid of his Scottish accent; but now that is less the case and a Scot may realise that his accent is worth retaining and may actually be an asset. I have noticed that in television 'commercials' a suggestion of Scottish speech, in the commending of an article advertised, has been made welcome, perhaps because the firm selling the goods pays Scotland the compliment of believing that Scots have a reputation for being forthright and honest and would not coax people into a bad bargain. In any case, politicians who represent Scottish or northern constituencies are likely to find the absence or concealment of a Standard English accent to be an advantage when they have to fight an election or keep in touch with the voters between elections.

But I am chiefly concerned with words, not with the varying sounds in which they are spoken. There has been, and to some extent remains, a wealth of dialect

words, and many of them are pleasant to the eye and ear and vividly expressive of the subject they describe. Accordingly, if our purpose is to keep the English language flexible and vivacious, it would seem an excellent thing to invigorate Correct English with additions from the various dialects. But there are difficulties here, as in the case of slang. A speaker does not wish to be misunderstood and this is still more true in the case of writing which is expected to be read in letters or books or newspapers by people dispersed all over the country. A Scot would know what is meant by taking a scunner (dislike) or by girning (complaining), but most English would not. If a Lancashire man praises a person or a thing as gradely (excellent) or jannock he might be giving his praise in vain to people in Kent. And I doubt whether all England understands that nesh means soft, delicate, and faint-hearted. Those are the meanings given to it in my *Oxford English Dictionary* which adds 'now dialect', implying that it has ceased to be Correct English. All these seem to me valuable words, well worth preserving and deserving general use today. But I would not advise an examinee to write in a history paper that Richard II was too nesh a king to hold his own among the tough barons who surrounded him. Nor would it be wise for him to call Henry V a gradely monarch in the wars.

There has been moreover a strong desire among the younger Scottish writers to revive the use of the traditional Scottish language which they eagerly insist is a tongue of its own, an independent cousin of

English, and not to be dismissed as a dialect. This is the speech that Robert Burns used in many (and all the best) of his poems and it is not easily read by English people without the frequent aid of a glossary. The renewal of this speech in a literary form, which is known as Lallans as distinct from the 'Hielans' or Gaelic speech, has not made much progress in Scotland except in the case of poets who are content with a small readership. The English can enjoy a certain amount of easily apprehended Scottishness as it is found in the plays of James Bridie and in the plays and some stories of Sir James Barrie, not to mention Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott. This seems characteristic without being baffling and it can be used as a valuable contributor to the general store of words.

James Bridie, for example, once pointed out that Scots have a most ample and effective vocabulary for describing one another.

> In any railway carriage he can mark his fellow passengers as gaucie, menseful, forfochen, couthie, perjink, cappernoytit, fusionless, dour or douce. It is interesting to reflect what a large proportion of this vocabulary describes character in which mental defect is a prominent feature. The Scots conversation is full of thowless, bloutering nyaffs; of feckless, donnart, doited, havering gowks; of daft, glaikit, foutering tawpies; of snuitit gomerals.

Here are some interpretations:

Gaucie: Implies a flourishing, buxom kind of grace.
Menseful: Thoughtful and considerate.

Forfochen: Thoroughly down and depressed.
Couthie: Comfortable, well-to-do.
Perjink: Tidy, precise, pernickety.
Fusionless: Sapless, feeble, lacking the richness of nature which was *phusis* in Greek. The old English for this Scottish fusion was foison, used by Shakespeare.
Cappernoytit: Confused in the mind or, in modern English slang, 'going round the bend'.
Douce: Gentle and courteous.
Glaikit: Silly. Burns contrasted Douce Wisdom with Glaikit Folly.

We cannot expect the English to absorb large helpings of these words foreign to them, but some of the easier ones might well be taken over the border. Perjink seems to be admirable for the person often called a fuss-pot and menseful just right for a sensible and sensitive person.

Bridie alluded to his rich native vocabulary for those now called clots – sumphs in Scottish – but evidently the great variety of English local dialects has been prodigiously inventive in the naming of dunder-heads. Mrs Wright, wife of Joseph Wright who had a massive collection in his *English Dialect Dictionary*, said that no less than thirteen hundred words for the chumps had been discovered in different parts of the country. Another Scot, Sir Thomas Urquhart (1611–60), the translator of Rabelais, poured out a stream of wonderful names for oafs and blockheads, including ninnie lobcocks, noddie meacocks, blockish grutnols,

CODSHEAD LOOBIES
SLUTCH CALFOLLIES
NODDIEPECK SIMPLETONS
doddipol joltheads
noddie meacocks
goose-caps
ninnie lobcocks
blockish grutnols

doddipol joltheads, jobbernol goose-caps, slutch calf-lollies, codshead loobies, and noddiepeck simpletons. Urquhart was part word-inventor and part a snapper-up of dialect riches and obviously enjoyed his banquet of Verboojuice.

Dialect is so vast a subject that in a book of this kind I can only touch the fringe of it. I have dealt so far with a single subject, folly and stupidity, and that in a very partial way. So it is obvious that if any one is interested and cares to ask for *Wright's Dictionary* in a library containing it, there is ample matter for study. But one need not go to the bookshelf: one can use one's ears in the street and market-town. One may pick up in any district words like mardle for loiter about, or mither, cousin to moider and moither, for worry or pester, snudge, which goes back to Tudor times, for a miser, dayligone (Northern Ireland) and dimpsy (West Country) for twilight, clarty (North Country) and stolchy (East Anglian) for muddy, fettle, not a noun as in 'fine fettle' but as a verb for to mend, and thrung for cluttered up or over-busy and loaded with work and care. The two last were sent me from Northumberland. Yorkshire and Lancashire have long been and remain well-equipped with expressive dialect words. Some they share with Scotland, like flyte for scold and wauf for tasteless. A clemmed (hungry) person who found his meat sodden and unsalted might sny (turn up) his nose at it and flyte the cook for serving up such a wauf mess. The hungry one would not say starved unless he was also shivering, since the former word means cold in Yorkshire. But if I begin

meandering into all the counties, there will be no end to it.

But there remains a problem. What does a word-lover and one who would like to bring the English language back into its fullness do about dialect words? It is a difficulty which I have had to face in my own work as an author, a journalist, and a word-collector. Over a period of twenty years I put together a number of small books best described as word-anthologies: what started me was the idea that, since there were many anthologies of the best prose and still more of the best poetry, it seemed odd that there were no similar collections of the most attractive words which are the raw material of all this excellent composition. Hence, with the aid of many friendly helpers who sent me letters about words specially appealing to them, I did put together quite a large number of old words that had gone out of use but seemed far too good to be wasted. Also, while I tried not to let my books be swamped in rare dialect words, some of these were so apt to what they stood for that they had to be admitted.

Then I realised that, while I was suggesting that rarities be made common and antiques be rescued from oblivion, when I came to do my own writing aimed at the general use of the contemporary reader, I might only annoy him with terms which needed an explanatory note. For example, if I wrote about a young woman out for the evening as a tittupy creature, I might be thought tiresome and affected. Tittupy was used by Jane Austen of a rickety carriage and by Sir

Walter Scott and others of that time to describe mincing girls displaying their charms. The opposite of a well-dressed tittupy piece (piece is traditional English for an attractive girl and a word so used by Shakespeare) is a slummock. This creature of dialect has the tittup's impudence, but is untidy and slovenly. Slommacky in Gloucestershire means devil-may-care. These are such lively and expressive words that we could well reintroduce them without the necessity of adding explanatory notes: but it would be foolish to crowd them all into one sentence, as I did for example's sake.

The same trouble arises with some words of classical origin which give a clear picture of what they mean only if you know Latin. Hebetude, for instance, meaning dull heaviness or crass stupidity, has been used by one great English poet and Latin scholar, A. E. Housman, to describe the state of mind of those who disagreed with him. It is a fine thumping word with which to batter an opponent, but many readers of more than average education might not understand it and would think that a writer using it was only showing off. The same is true of concinnity, a Latin word for 'the skilful harmonizing of parts in thought and speech' and so implying elegance of style. But a pupil who wrote in a school essay about some famous author that there was no hebetude in his work but always complete concinnity might puzzle and aggravate a teacher who did not want to be bothered with rummaging in the dictionary. It is naturally a rule of popular journalism not to use words which will make

the reader feel inferior and uneducated; and even in papers aiming at an intellectual – James Bridie might have called it a menseful – public, the journalist is not encouraged to show excessive learning in his choice of vocabulary.

Sir Max Beerbohm, by general consent a master of style in his essays, was ready to risk using words which would drive most of his readers to the lexicon. He called the kind of person who can give a quick answer in a Brains Trust or Quiz 'a quodlibetarian' since quodlibet, Latin for 'what you will', was once a technical term for a philosophical problem appointed for discussion. Perhaps there is no other word which so fittingly describes the Brains Trust expert in rapid and adequate replies. But, despite the authority given to this classical monster by Sir Max, I would hesitate to use it myself because it would leave most readers baffled.

What applies to the long classical words applies also to many picturesque words that are plentiful in local dialects: it would be fun to introduce them, but our fun may be the readers' frustration. What one can safely do is to bring dialect words, as one brings some reputable slang, into one's ordinary conversation and see how they are received. Certainly those living in a district where the dialect word is familiar as well as effective should keep it alive in conversation or in private letter-writing. But if one is writing answers to examination questions, or for any kind of public reading outside the area where the word is known, one has to be careful.

By all means let dialect be preserved in talk. It makes

a fascinating study and hobby for those who like investigating the fabric of the English vocabulary. In several regions, such as Yorkshire, Lancashire, and the Lake District, there are Dialect Societies which have meetings and issue publications, and the address of the Secretary can probably be found by asking the Chief Librarian at any large Public Library. I have beside me as I write an issue of the *Journal of the Lancashire Dialect Society* which contains some of the poetry written during the nineteenth century by the poets of the mill-towns, Edwin Waugh of Rochdale and Samuel Laycock of Stalybridge. It is a pleasure to read these simple and deeply moving pieces. The spelling used represents the local pronunciation. Laycock's 'Welcome, Bonny Brid' has long been well known in Lancashire and often recited. It was addressed to a new arrival in a growing and hungry family during the Cotton Famine. Though

We're short o' pobbies for eawr Joe,

the new-comer is welcome in the sparsely-supplied home.

Cheer up! these toimes 'll awter soon;
Aw'm beawn to beigh another spoon –
One for thee;
An' as tha's sich a pratty face
Aw'll let thee have eawr Charley's place
On mi knee.
Hush-a-babby, hush-a-bee,
Oh, what a temper! dear-a-mee,
Heaw tha skrikes!

Here's a bit o' sugar, sithee;
Howd thi noise, an then aw'll gie thee
Owt tha likes.
We've nobbut getten coarsish fare,
But, eawt o' this tha'll get thi share,
Never fear.
Aw hope tha'll never want a meal,
But allis fill thi bally weel
While th'art here.
Thi feyther's noan been wed so long,
An' yet tha sees he's middlin' throng
Wi' yo' o.
Besides thi little brother Ted,
We've one upsteers, asleep i' bed,
Wi' eawr Joe.
But tho' we've childer two or three,
We'll mak' a bit o' reawm for thee,
Bless thee, lad!
Th'art prattiest brid we have i' th' nest,
So hutch up closer to mi breast;
Aw'm thi dad.

Here is an eloquence of elemental feeling that might seem sickly if it were not rendered in the popular speech of its place and time. Skrikes, sithee (see thou), throng, the same as thrung previously mentioned, and hutch up for nestle could hardly be better. Some dialect poems of this kind are still being written and the dialects are far from dwindling away, despite all the over-riding voices speaking Correct English on the air.

CHAPTER SIX

WORDS ACROSS THE OCEAN

If the advice is ever given in England to avoid 'Americanisms' in one's writing it is a warning that needs scrutiny rather than obedience. If the counsel is directed against rough American slang it might equally be directed at rough English slang. What the English must realise is that good American is the equal of good English and that, if the conserving of old words and usages be a virtue, then the Americans are to be commended for retaining things, and good things, that we have lost.

The American language may be described as Old English with many European and also a few African Negro contributions. The word Negro comes from Spain. Thus a story of the Wild West may introduce a French word, prairie, which can have come down from Canada, the Indian tomahawk and moccasin, and that very old English official, the sheriff. Those who like to slip a coin in the juke-box in order to get a tune are following an American habit which has acquired the word juke from the coloured folk. The word is no beauty, but the products of the article are no beauties either as a rule and juke will do for them. In the menu of a restaurant forms of German may appear, as in kole for cabbage. It took all worlds to make that world.

But the essence of the American vocabulary lay in

the English of the early settlers. The Pilgrim Fathers and the adventuring Colonists took with them in the early seventeenth century the English language as it was spoken in Jacobean England and written in its most splendid form by the poets of the period and by the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible. The Puritan voyagers would not be much addicted to reading poetry since much of it was then to be found in the form of plays and they regarded the theatre as the haunt of Satan offering sinful pleasures to the public. But the language they carried with them on their tiny ships and imported to their vast new world was a noble one because they took the Bible as their comfort. (Comfort originally meant strength, true to its Latin origin in the adjective *fortis* for brave or strong, a usage which survives in the old phrase, 'the Holy Ghost, the Comforter'; this did not mean that the Holy Spirit was soft or sweet or woolly, but bracing and fortifying.)

I have already alluded to some of the old survivals, the simple and expressive fall or fall of the year instead of the Latin autumn, which was just replacing it when Shakespeare was writing. We can still notice a certain distaste for autumn in English country places: a Yorkshire farmer may speak of 't' back end'. There are other interesting survivals across the Atlantic, sometimes mystifying to the English, as in the case of faucet for tap. Side-walk, for pavement, is Old English and it is the more clearly explanatory word: the middle of the road is paved, but a side-walk says what it means. Homely has retained in America its original

English sense of plain, ill-favoured and unsightly. Milton applied this adjective to 'coarse complexions and cheeks of sorry grain', but in England it is now a much kinder word and means pleasantly simple and unaffected. There is an obvious trap here for English people in America or meeting Americans; it would be most unfortunate to speak of a girl as homely when meaning to pay her a compliment: the speaker would in fact be speaking rudely of her looks. Here is a case for minding both languages.

As English spelling was in a very fluid state at that time the first Anglo-Americans would write their words down according to taste. Since then on both sides of the Atlantic spelling has been stabilised and the American rules are in some cases slightly different from our own. The American method is often more sensible. Is there any reason, except ancient custom, why we should keep the 'u' in Latin words which picked it up on their way through France? The Latin *honor* became French *honneur* and we continue to make it honour, keeping the 'u' but not the extra 'n'. The same has happened with the Latin *labor* which gave the French *le laboureur* for the worker and *labourieux* to describe the nature of his task. We strangely keep the 'u' in labour and labourer, but drop it in laborious. Also we read of the amours of amorous, not amourous, people. It is impossible to make sense of this, but those who try to introduce reason into English spelling do not find many imitators. Bernard Shaw in his plays and prefaces always dropped the 'u' and wrote about men of honor, forms of humor, and members of the

Labor Party. This was sensible, but evidently had small appeal. So the writer of English who wants his work to have conventional approval must continue to keep the unnecessary letter discarded generally in America and in a lonely way by Shaw.

The English affection for an added 'u', not shared across the Atlantic, is to be seen in catalogue and prologue: both these words come from the Greek, in which the term *logos* signified a whole series of things, first word, then argument in words, and finally knowledge set in words as a study or science. Hence came all our cumbrous words ending in -ology. There was no 'u' anywhere in the Greek *logos*. When the Americans write prolog and catalog, they are not only being sensibly brief; they are being more correctly Grecian than we are. There is sense also in their omission of the superfluous 'l' which we keep, for instance, in traveller. If one who sails is a sailor and one who toils a toiler, why should not the person who travels be simply a traveler? I have not much liking for travelog to describe a film illustrating foreign places and scenery, but that is because it is an awkward combination of the French *travail* with the Greek *logos*. It is not the spelling that is open to criticism.

Our spelling of theatre, which the Americans usually write theater, is caused by the appearance of the Greek *theatron*, meaning a seeing-place, from which it is directly taken. Centre is from the Latin *centrum* and so can be regarded as correct. But, like theater, the American center, if not so close to its classical parent, is true to the common pronunciation.

But, of course, if one starts to relate English spelling to English pronunciation, the complications are endless. My point is that the English should respect American differences of spelling as reasonable though it would be unwise for an individual to adopt them. He might only be accused of a mistake. Bernard Shaw was well justified in his discarding of the 'u's' he disliked. But the British Labour Party, however Radical or Socialist its politics, is content to be strictly conservative in its spelling. So are we nearly all. Few, if any, have followed our rather distant neighbours of the English-speaking Union in writing of them as neighbors.

The more we examine the American language the more contradictory do we find the ways in which it is used and shaped. In informal talk there is a tendency to make things short and snappy; but on a higher level there is a readiness to use long words of Latin origin where we have shorter ones. The American, although he may deem himself to be full of 'pep' and bustle, will operate the elevator to get to his apartment while the Englishman works the lift to reach his flat. When there the American will not rest, he must relax: it is now everybody's ambition to be relaxed, although to the Victorians a relaxed person meant a sluggish or lazy one.

Transport is lengthened into transportation. But the English have no right to feel superior about this eagerness for extra syllables since we are rapidly running to length ourselves. An example of that is the favour shown to the word potentiality which has six syllables where the single syllable of chance or strength

The American will operate the elevator to get to his apartment

The Englishman works the lift to reach his flat

would do instead. Here is a phrase from a Business Company's annual report: 'We are exhibiting great developmental potentiality'. All that means is that we are showing that we can grow and spread. When we are using language of this swollen kind we are in no position to sniff at American verbosity. There is a habit now of turning an adjective into a noun: a potential is commonly employed and one frequently sees a differential written where all that is meant is a difference. Thus possible differences are elongated without need into potential differentials.

In some cases of pronunciation American ways are the more reasonable. The word schedule, for example, comes from the Greek *schizein* meaning to cut off: the schedule was first a piece of paper snipped off for the making of a list. The Greek 'ch' was pronounced hard like our 'k' as it remains in our word school. When Americans speak of what we call a schedule as a skedule, they are being classically correct. School, incidentally, is a word that has undergone a remarkable change. *Skole* was originally the Greek for leisure, but since the Greeks regarded education as a pleasant and easy way of spending the time the word was transferred from a period of agreeable activity to a period and then a place of instruction. It must be surprising to the school-children of today to learn that they are going to school for leisurely recreation.

Returning to pronunciation, we find the Americans more logical in talking of privacy with a long 'i'. We speak the word as though it were privvacy, although we say private and not privvate. They are also more faith-

ful to the classic original in not pronouncing docile with a long 'o' as we do. The 'o' is short in the Latin adjective from which it comes. But there are also cases in which they are not as accurate as the English. Evolution is often and wrongly given a short 'e' in American; the initial 'e' in Latin, meaning out or from, was always long. There is reason, however, in keeping the 'i' short in certain adjectives such as fertile. Fertil instead of fertile sounds peculiar to the English, but it better represents the Latin adjective *fertilis*.

It happened that just after writing this I went to see Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* played at the Old Vic Theatre and certain things in the performance set me reading the text again. I noticed that when Olivia says to Viola, who is acting as Orsino's ambassador of affection, 'How does he love me?', the latter answers:

With adorations, with fertile tears,
With groans that thunder love, with eyes of fire.

The Elizabethans spoke the noun-termination 'ion' as two syllables. They did not use our slurred form adorashun: for them it was ad-or-a-ti-on. If we scan Viola's words thus,

With ad-or-a-ti-ons, with fertile tears,

the line runs much more easily if fertile is pronounced fertil, since the feet of the ten-syllabled line are normally of short-long syllables. In Viola's second line that I quoted the first syllables of each foot are with, that, er, with, and of, all short and unfit for stressing. So, if

Viola says 'fertile tears', giving a long 'i' to fertile, she breaks the rhythm. I am sure that the boy player who spoke Viola's part for Shakespeare said fertil.

This opinion was confirmed when, with the aid of a concordance, I looked up the other passages in which Shakespeare used fertile in lines of poetry. In the last scene of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Anne Page, in her speech about Windsor and the Order of the Garter, speaks the line:

More fertile-fresh than all the field to see.

It is much easier and more rhythmical to say fertil-fresh than fertile-fresh here. In *Antony and Cleopatra* (Act I, Scene 2) the Soothsayer says in jest to Charmian who has asked how many children she will have:

If every of your wishes had a womb
And fertile every wish, a million.

Plainly the second syllable of fertile is unstressed and short. Further uses of the word give further evidence of this. If the actress playing Viola's part in our time were to talk in the Elizabethan manner of 'fertil tears' people in England would say that she was showing her ignorance. But in America she would be approved as well as understood because here the American pronunciation is truly Old English.

On the whole I find that there is very little difference between contemporary English and American as they are written by the better educated people of the two nations. To test this, I read carefully through a section

of a Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, the section devoted to arts and hobbies. I noted that this paper uses the English spelling theatre, instead of theater, but prefers center to centre. The vocabulary used by the contributors was that which one would expect to find in the London *Times*.

Naturally, if we turn to papers aimed at a much larger and slang-employing public, there will be great differences, but I cannot see that Correct American departs, except in the few instances to which I have alluded, from Correct English. That is a great convenience for the world since the use of English all over the globe has been so widely spread and is still expanding under American as well as English influences, both social and commercial. It would indeed be a nuisance if the speech thus diffused were of two radically different kinds so that an Asian or an African who had learned one form of English had then to adapt himself to another. He will inevitably hear English spoken with diverse accents, according to the source of his teaching, and he will notice some trifling differences in spelling: but he will not, when he reads, have to carry two separate dictionaries to help him.

But in conversational matters and especially in describing articles of food there are differences which can be confusing. The English scone is a biscuit in America and the English biscuit, if at all dry, is a cracker in the United States. An English child in America who asked for a cracker and expected the mildly explosive toy which we pull at parties and at Christmas time would get instead the kind of biscuit

which the English eat with cheese. If he wants a sweet biscuit, he must ask for a cookie. But many of these terms do cross the ocean in time. We have accepted the American sundae for an ice-cream with fruity additions, and most English learn quite early in life what hot dogs and hamburgers are.

The motorists, too, have a different set of names. Petrol is gas in America and what the English call the bonnet of the car is the hood. So what I have said about there being no need to carry a dictionary must be taken as applying only to serious writing on serious subjects. In the school-room, the kitchen, and the street, both nations have to do some translating.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WORDS AND NEWS

So much of our reading comes to us in newspapers that, if we are to watch our words and the use of words by others, we must do that reading in a critical but not pernickety way. (Incidentally, the origin of pernickety is unknown: perhaps I should have written precise or fastidious, which are its dictionary definitions, but pernickety is one of those words which sound so right for the subject that it has worked its way up from slang to a respectable status.) My opinion, formed by one who has had to read more newspapers than do most, is that not only does much good writing go into the papers aiming at a limited and highly educated public but that the papers with vast circulations are far better written than are many pamphlets and booklets composed to advance good causes, expound policies, and demand reforms.

The name journalese has been given to the style used in popular papers; there once was a way of writing peculiar to those journals, but it has largely disappeared. There was a habit of discovering or making up an alternative word or phrase for an article in common use. There might be the choice of an unusual verb instead of a simple one, such as 'hail from' instead of 'come from'. I remember that when I was at school I described a certain Greek poet as hailing

from a certain Greek island. My master then sarcastically inquired whether I wished to sit for a scholarship in the lower reaches of Fleet Street: if so, I was going the right way. I was properly corrected. 'Hailing from' is a piece of silliness.

But it is at least short. Very often the journalese alternative was a long, cumbrous word, possibly supposed to be amusing. An oyster would be called 'the succulent bivalve', mention of sun or rain brought an allusion to 'the Clerk of the weather and his vagaries', a tiger would be called 'Master Stripes', and in sporting reports the cricket-ball or foot-ball was 'the leather', the cricket bat 'the willow', and the goal-posts 'the uprights'. That kind of writing has almost completely disappeared: in newspaper offices a spade is now a spade and not an agricultural implement.

Before writing this I read carefully through a copy of the *Daily Mail* whose circulation is so large that it must also be miscellaneous. The style in general was forcible, direct, and lucid. But I did discover one paragraph with careless writing which could convey a completely wrong meaning and could have been set right simply by altering the positions of a few words. Here is the sentence:

> A 'financially embarrassed' country rector will know whether he has to leave the Church next week when a solicitor reports on his £1,000 debts to the Bishop of Lincoln.

First, would he have to leave next week or was he going to know about it next week? Presumably the

latter. Secondly, it must be noted that the inverted commas put round 'financially embarrassed' properly suggests that the writer thought the phrase to be formal and pompous. The rector was hard-up or short of money, which is serious. But the longer term sounds more respectable. To be hard-up is no disgrace and natural since the salaries of the clergy are so small. (Why, incidentally, do the clergy have their salaries called stipends?) The mistake lies in the implication that the rector had been borrowing a large sum from the Bishop himself. The rest of the report makes it plain that the debt was caused by the return of the rector and his family from Australia and by the cost of furnishings and fittings at the rectory. So there was no '£1,000 debts to the Bishop of Lincoln' and the misunderstanding could have been avoided by putting the words in their right order. The sentence should run: 'When a solicitor reports to the Bishop of Lincoln on his (the rector's) £1,000 debts'. I have inserted 'the rector's' because another confusion is possible. The solicitor is not reporting on his own debts. The word 'his' has always to be carefully watched: it can so easily be applied to one or more people. For an elementary example, consider 'Tom met a man going to his home'. Whose home?

The second phrase which I disliked was no fault of the journalist. It was one of frequent occurrence in public statements: 'Police investigating the mystery of a charred skeleton in the front seat of a burnt-out motor-car said, "We can no longer rule out foul play".' What they meant is 'Foul play is possible', but

this business of 'not ruling out' has become extremely fashionable. I frequently see this kind of announcement about a threatened epidemic. 'The possibility of the infection spreading cannot be ruled out'. Why not say that the infection may spread?

It is not journalists who like to invent an alternative for a plain word like possible and run after length for length's sake. They have good reasons for not liking length, since their space is nearly always limited and they know that their 'copy' is liable to be cut by the sub-editor who has to prepare it for rapid printing and fit it into a paper which is nearly always over-crowded already. The word-spinning journalism belonged to a more leisurely and spacious age in which what would now get a quarter of a column was given an entire column. 'A penny-a-liner' was the name given to the writer paid, not extravagantly, by space-rates and he naturally wanted to fill up as many lines as possible in his search for as many pence as possible. Hence, if there was space available, he would spread himself. Accordingly, the oysters that I mentioned were not eaten: there was 'plentiful consumption of the succulent bivalves'. But that went long ago. Journalism, especially in its most popular forms, has to be concise and also to be clear. Editors do not want to have readers bored by windy openings of an article or puzzled by a flow of unusual words or elaborate constructions. In the issue of the paper that I have just mentioned the writing was terse and simple: its leading articles were notable for coming to a point and making it firmly, and leading articles are not always the strongest point of journalism.

Naturally the writer who is committing an important paper to an opinion on an important topic has to be careful: he must not seem to lay down the law in too summary a fashion. The greater the responsibility of the paper, the harder it is to write the leading article because the words will be carefully weighed. But that does not excuse a straggle of trailing and evasive clauses. It is possible to find in the highest quarters of journalism a sentence like this one:

> On the other hand the likelihood has to be borne in mind that the Government, while endeavouring to formulate a realistic economic policy, has failed to give due consideration to the possibility of deteriorating conditions beginning to eventuate in the sphere of our national economy, a point to which attention is being called with maximum urgency by the leaders of the Opposition. An inadequate reaction to the dangers of financial imbalance may have serious repercussions.

The Political Correspondent in a popular paper might summarise this curtly and sufficiently clearly by writing: 'The Opposition stresses that the Government, while trying to base its economic policy on facts, is insufficiently aware that things may get worse, and that the results may be serious.'

A reporter would be soon out of work if he let his writing meander like the sentence in the leading article which I have made up, without, I think, giving an unfair parody of the cautious and tortuous style. The greater part of journalism today is innocent of word-

spinning, but even among those least guilty of rambling on, certain words and phrases in vogue seem to have a wide fascination. For example, 'conditions continue to deteriorate' is continually appearing as a substitute for 'things go on getting worse'. Repercussion, for result, is another hard-worked favourite.

The chief offenders against plain English are not the journalists but those who issue official statements. They have an obstinate affection for the lengthy word. In most departments of national and some of local government and in most important industries and businesses there is a person known as the Public Relations Officer. His task is to consider the best ways of stating the official policy and administrative decisions and to supply the members of the Press either personally with 'hand-outs' or by sending round written statements. He or she has a most important part in the supply of news which it may be very important for many people to know. He or she has usually come into the public service by way of journalism and should be aware of the advantage to be gained by brevity and clarity. But apparently the P.R.O. cannot persuade his superiors that these virtues are especially important in establishing the desired 'good relations' with the public.

The word relation is itself often introduced for no purpose. 'In relation to' is substituted for 'about' with no gain of meaning. Sir Ernest Gowers, whose book on *Plain Words* is an admirable Government publication which not all Government servants seem to read, has commented also on the dragging in of qualifying adverbs where no qualification is needed. One of these is

"Up-to-date cases are relatively few, but a further incidence of infection cannot be ruled out".

relatively. He wittily observes that there is an official coyness which fears a bare word as though it were committing an indecent exposure. 'The most indecent adjectives are, it seems, those of quantity or measure, such as short and long, many and few, heavy and light. The adverbial dressing-gowns most favoured are unduly, relatively, and comparatively.' Relatively is introduced without any reason at all. A public announcement may state that there has been an outbreak of disease and add, 'Up-to-date cases are relatively few, but a further incidence of infection cannot be ruled out'. Relative to what? Fortunately the cases are just few. In statements of this kind nothing is ever begun: it is initiated. Nor are things understood: they are appreciated. 'It is appreciated by the Ministry that a course of mass-vaccination must be initiated.'

One of the curious words used in jargon of this kind is satisfied. This is a strange substitute for the ordinary aware or convinced. It is frequently heard in Ministerial replies to questions in Parliament. 'The Minister is satisfied.' Some of the satisfactions thus announced by officials are astonishing. For example, I have seen that a town's Medical Officer of Health, when asked about the cause of an outbreak of polio, said that he 'was satisfied that the local river was heavily polluted with sewage'. One of our best writers about word-usage, Mr V. H. Collins, in his book called *Right Word, Wrong Word*, has quoted from an American source an even more preposterous form of satisfaction, 'The man's family is satisfied that he was murdered'.

People in authority often have to say No. But they do not like saying No in a bluntly dismissive way. So the Minister, when turning down a proposal, takes refuge in a longer way of saying it which is meant to be a kinder way or at least less likely to stir up indignation and cause unpopularity. So, when we read his reply in the Parliamentary report in the morning's paper, we learn that 'he is not in a position' to do this or that. Such an answer may be untrue: he is in a position to take the action requested but for some reason he thinks it wrong or foolish. So he makes this escape. There is no great harm done, since we know what he means and know also his wish to be polite and inoffensive. The lie is a small and a white one. Other evasive phrases of the Minister or the Public Relations Officer speaking for a Department are 'not prepared to' and 'we do not see our way to'. Again, the extra words are strictly unnecessary but are tactically and courteously devised. But the ordinary person who is writing a letter need not be wordy: yet even he is shy of the direct negative. He prefers to write that he is sorry that he cannot accept the invitation when he may not be sorry at all and is glad to stay away.

But since this kind of writing is common form the person who sent out the invitation is not misled any more than I am misled into believing that a letter beginning 'Dear Mr Brown' must come from a person who is extremely fond of me. Beginning all letters with Dear has been general for so long that we do not pause to consider the absurdity when somebody is complaining about an unpaid bill or composing an angry protest

about something that has annoyed him. Many letters are written to newspapers by people who are obviously enraged by the policy of that paper or by some statement in it which they regard as wholly incorrect. The general practice in newspaper offices is to omit the Dear whether the letter be a commendation or a tirade. Those wanting their opinions to appear in 'Letters to the Editor' can safely begin with a plain 'Sir' and end with 'Yours etcetera' which is certainly a non-committal ending and quite different from the 'Yours sincerely' which may strangely accompany a note making bogus excuses. Sometimes the signature begins 'Your obedient servant', but that is a piece of nonsense. The purchaser of a paper is more the master than the servant of the editor and does not intend to take orders from him.

There is a special kind of journalese which has been made up to suit the limited space of the head-line. Newspaper columns are narrow and, unless the head-line is spread over the several columns allotted to an important feature, it may be very difficult to find words which can be squeezed in. The sub-editors who must make up the head-lines have a teasing job; the head-lines must be extremely short, yet they are expected to summarise what follows as far as possible. There is a time-problem as well as a space-problem, for sub-editors on evening and daily papers are usually working in a hurry. To cope with these difficulties a particular series of words has been brought into use, some of which are not commonly seen elsewhere.

A common example of that is the word probe, which

is always turning up in head-lines in popular papers. Words like commissions of inquiry, investigations, and examinations cannot easily be accommodated in the few available inches; so the useful probe is much employed. An investigation into immorality becomes for head-line purposes a Vice Probe. But probe is not a noun that we would use in this sense in domestic conversation. A husband does not say to his wife 'These bills seem extortionate. Will you have a Price Probe?' Yet, if a government appoints a committee to investigate the cost of living it may well become a Price Probe in the head-lines. Or perhaps a Cost Quiz. Quiz has become another sub-editors' darling because of its brevity.

Words of that kind are fairly numerous and some of them are quite outside the range of normal talk or writing. Nobody would speak of holding a parley with his neighbours, but you may see at the top of a column that there have been 'Lively scenes at T.U. Parley' which means that there have been squabbles and uproar at a Trade Union Congress. Scenes make a frequent appearance in Head-line English because they are conveniently shorter than excitements, demonstrations, and so on. They usually have a suitably brief adjective attached, lively, grim, or gay. For the same reasons abbreviations and initials are forced upon the head-line makers. They do not call an Eisenhower Ike or a Macmillan Mac because they want to be familiar, but because it is the easiest way in which they can wedge these names into the head of a narrow column. The Canadian Prime Minister Diefenbaker inevitably

became Dief. Even owners of not very long names like Kennedy and Kruscheff may both become Mr K. If somebody has been arrested he may be described as held in order that four letters can be saved and, if the Criminal Investigation Department is involved, we may read of a C.I.D. Probe or see, more strangely, 'Yard Moves'.

A foreigner, on seeing this curious information in an English paper, might imagine that some person or object has been shifted over a space of three feet: the stranger is unlikely to know, unless he has been a great reader of detective stories in English, that Scotland Yard is now the headquarters of the C.I.D. (Incidentally, the name is derived jointly from an ancient palace used by the old kings of Scotland when in London and from a landing-yard used by the coal barges which brought London some of its fuel that way until a hundred and thirty years ago.) But even the three syllables of Scotland Yard may be too long to fit into a head-line announcement. So, when the chief detectives are called in, we are faced with the mysterious 'Yard Moves'. What man, when reading about a crime over the teacups, would say, 'I see the Yard has moved'? His wife might think that there had been a minor earthquake outside the kitchen window.

These head-line devices need explaining. But they do not greatly affect the style and vocabulary of what appears in the subsequent columns. That is for the most part concise and comes quickly to the point. In this respect Newspaper English can set an example to those who have to write answers to examination

questions. For that purpose it is not enough to have learned a great many facts or to have plenty of ideas when one is asked to explain this or that historical trend or to estimate the qualities and values of a writer's work. The facts and ideas must be kept in order in the examinee's mind and put on paper in an orderly, as well as a rapid, way. To know a great deal is valuable, but it can be a handicap unless the knowledge is related to the time and space at the disposal of those giving answers amid the nervous pressure of an important test. To pour out a stream of information and opinion without a proper sense of proportion may do more harm than good. It is essential to see at the first glance how many questions have to be answered and how much time can be given to each and then to use that time to the best advantage. In that the problems of the examinee are similar to those of the journalist. The author of a book has usually time and space in which to stretch himself, but a writer for the newspapers is working to the clock and knows that he can only have so many inches or so many words in which to deliver his report or criticism or to make the essential points in a leading article.

Consequently the most popular newspapers, as well as those aimed at a limited readership, are worth attention for the methods (not, please, the methodology) which journalists employ. The vocabulary may not be the same as that used by the exalted men of letters, but at least it will not be swollen or pompous. Tangled writing and obscurity of thought are faults into which it is easy to fall and which can undo all the effort put

into a strenuous preparation for an exam and the memorising of facts. These faults the journalist does not always avoid, as I have admitted, especially in the case of leading articles which are woolly and indecisive. But the reporting of news can be a model of selection. Facts are limited to those most relevant; there is brevity of treatment and words are made to do their job economically and are not spilled in a wasteful profusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WORDS AND INVENTIONS

Needs create words: the more articles we make, the more names must we make for them. Because we have added so much to our possessions and contrivances we have had to add many pages to the dictionary in recent years.

It is a commonplace that during the last century, and more especially during the last fifty years, the ways in which men and women conduct their lives, do their work, and go about from place to place have altered to an extent and at a pace inconceivable by an inhabitant of England in 1800. When Charles Dickens began to write as a journalist and a novelist in the early eighteen-thirties the vocabulary of travel was very small indeed. That was natural, since the only method of making a journey on land in his youth was by walking, riding on a horse, or being pulled by a horse. So foot-words and horse-words sufficed. Some of them, like chariot for a private carriage, suggested a picturesque rapidity. Steam-traction for passenger trains (there had long been horse-drawn vehicles for goods on rails) was introduced on the Stockton-Darlington Railway in 1825, but general use of railways was only developed during the next ten and twenty years. The great railway boom began in 1844 and then new words had to be found; but it is interesting to notice how custom prevailed. The word coach,

for instance, was transferred to the steam-traffic in the form of railway-coach. The horses had gone; but the vehicle remained.

The word locomotive was used of 'a vehicle or piece of machinery moving by its own power' in 1815; it was not till 1841, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that it was 'adopted for or used in locomotion'. That word, meaning place-movement, was taken from the Latin and this habit of using ancient languages to find names for new inventions was soon generally adopted. The railway workers, though unlikely to be Latin scholars, accepted it and later came to use the abbreviation 'loco' for a railway-engine.

One cannot envisage the early Dickens characters like Mr Pickwick boarding a train or imagine Fagin teaching his boys the artful dodgery of travelling without railway tickets. It is a curious fact that America was ahead of us in the use of railways. Dickens wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1843-4, and though steam-trains were then running all the journeys in Martin's England are made by coach: horse-language sufficed. But when Martin crosses to America he finds steam trains at work. Then the change came rapidly in England and with it came a new vocabulary. When Dickens wrote his story called *Mugby Junction* it was already assumed that the word junction, from the Latin verb *jungere*, to join, was applied to a meeting not of roads but of railway-lines.

Within a century and a quarter, that is within the space of two not very long lives, we have completely abolished the old ideas of distance with our jet-planes

which cross the Atlantic in a few hours. Now the astonishing space-man rocketed into orbit has rivalled the boast of Shakespeare's Puck that he would put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes. Those who dislike long classical words can welcome the brevity and simplicity of jet-plane and space-man, but they have also to face a vast new vocabulary of puzzling and tongue-twisting words.

The host of studies and activities vaguely lumped together as 'Science' has completely changed not only our communications and industrial methods but our ways of getting our food and running our homes. Naturally, in view of this, it is insisted that we must have more scientific workers and so the national educational system is being enlarged and altered in order to provide a steady flow of experts and inventors, together with the necessary teams of research workers and technicians engaged in these enterprises. (The word technician is another classicism, derived from the Greek *techne*, meaning art or craft. I note that technician was a term which arrived in 1833, but I think that it was then still a rarity.) Obviously, with so many subjects of study rapidly multiplying and with so many new discoveries and achievements springing from them, new words, almost a new language, were needed to describe what was being done.

There was at one time an objection raised by purists to the noun scientist, but most people now accept it as established. The scientists relied for the most part on the classics to provide the names used in their laboratories. It seems strange that, when Greek and Latin

are being far less widely taught than they used to be, Greek and Latin words or elements of words are being continually employed to give names to the products of science. It is therefore much easier for a person who has received at least the rudiments of a classical education to understand the new vocabulary than it is for the people who are actually making the new things. But, since the number of classical scholars is now a much smaller proportion of the whole population than it used to be, it is necessary for us all to understand the meanings of the Greek and Latin word-elements which are constantly in general use.

It might be thought that the scientists and inventors, since they are not always or even often classically trained, would have chosen the verbal roots and terms available in their own language. It would have seemed natural, for example, when the means of rapidly passing messages in writing or by voice over long distances had been discovered, to describe these methods in words such as far-write or far-speak. But that did not happen. Recourse was made to the ancient tongues, in this case Greek, and the result was telegraph and telephone and now, when pictures are also being immediately transmitted, television. The last of these is a mixture of Latin and Greek: if linguistic purity had been observed and Greek alone employed, we should talk of teleoptics and not of television. Some people think it is always wrong to mix these two languages when we are making up words, but the process has been carried so far that it cannot be upset now. There was never any move to use simple English

terms, such as the far-write and far-speak already mentioned or, in the case of television, to describe the invention as far-sight. The Americans, using Audio and Video, Latin for 'I hear' and 'I see', for sound radio and television are being faithfully classical: they are also using short words quickly understood.

It will assist English people tackling the lingo of the science-invention world if some of the word-elements are explained. It may be helpful to begin with the Greek prepositions since they appear in so many words. *Ana* means up and *cata* down. The Greek *luein* means to loosen; so analysis is a loosening up. *Psyche* signified soul or spirit and later character in general; consequently the practice of psychoanalysis describes a spirit-loosening-up, for purposes of healing. Psychology is a general term for all the lore of the individual's non-material entity. A catalyst is a loosener-down; the Greek *catalusis* was used in chemistry for the presence of a substance which produces change without itself undergoing change and the word catalyst is now vaguely used for a person who creates changes. The people who speak of a catalyst must, I imagine, think that it sounds learned; they may not really know what it means. Catalysis was once used to mean a general loosening or decay, just as cataract is used for a break-down of barriers which produces a break-through, especially of waters.

Meta was Greek for after and became associated with change; so, with *morphe* meaning shape in Greek, metamorphosis was a term chosen for an alteration of

Far Ahead

shape and it has been a favourite with those who enjoy employing formidable terms as a general word for change. People will say that something has undergone a metamorphosis when all they mean is alteration. Latin also assists those who want to convey the meaning of change with more syllables; they speak of vicissitude and vicarious, which come from the Latin *vix*.

Para meant alongside in Greek; hence words beginning in this way suggest either alongside in space or similarity in kind. The parallel bars in the gymnasium are so called because of the Greek for 'beside one another'; the word parallel was later transferred from things situated together to things resembling one another. Paratyphoid fever, for example, means 'a fever resembling typhoid but taking a milder course'. Parable is our form of a Greek word for something thrown alongside and so for something parallel or similar. Thus it was applied to a story which gives an individual example of a general truth, like the parables in the Bible. But a thing which lies alongside can also be thought of as something extra. This is exemplified in our curious word paraphernalia. *Pherne* was the Greek for a dowry and the paraphernalia were the additional articles, small trinkets and so on, which the wife kept when the husband had taken the dowry. With us it has come to mean all sorts of bits and pieces, surviving because it looks and sounds so aptly descriptive of a clutter.

Two Greek prepositions which may cause confusion because they look rather alike and have contrary

means are *hupo* and *huper* (hypo and hyper to us), equivalents of the Latin *sub* and *super*. Hypo means under and hyper over. People call a suggestion a hypothesis; it was Greek for something put under. Hypochondriac is the name given to a person who thinks he is ill, whether the doctor calls him ill or not, and then clings to and even enjoys the idea. That has a very strange origin. The hypochondria in Greek were the parts below the ribs and these contain the liver and the gall-bladder which were deemed to be the source of melancholy, which is the Greek for black bile. Those afflicted with troubles of the liver and the gall-bladder have good reason to be depressed and need not be hypochondriacs in the sense of self-pitying semi-invalids. The word hypochondria was later extended from the real sufferer to the imaginary one. The hypochondriac as well as the genuine patient may be relieved with hypodermic injections, i.e. jabs under the skin, the Greek for skin being *derma*.

Hyper in our spelling means over and, just as a parabole or parable means a thing thrown alongside, so a hyperbole means something thrown on top and so an exaggeration. In valuing things one may indulge in hyperbolic praise or be hypercritical, which means over-exacting or fussy. The Latin *super* for over is a more common element than the Greek *huper* and is to be found in a huge number, or superfluity, of words describing excessive things. It is attached to all sorts of articles in the language of advertisements and has been isolated in slang to mean most excellent. It would be a very learned school-boy who said of something much

enjoyed 'It's hyper!', but 'It's super!' has long been common.

Dia at the beginning of a word means through. The doctor who diagnoses an invalid or hypochondriac is passing his examination through him. A diagonal moves through from angle to angle and a diameter goes through the centre. A diatribe is a wearing through and so a violent or tedious discourse. Diabolic comes from the Greek for a slanderer, one who threw accusations across or through his victim.

One could go on for a very long time explaining words with a classical prefix of this kind. But it will save time if they are put in a list so that those interested in verbal meanings and origins can set to work with at least the first syllable explained. Here is a short table for guidance:

Greek	English	Example
a	not	amorphous, shapeless
amphi	round	amphitheatre, a circle for spectators
ana	down	analysis, loosening down
anti	against	antidote, a medicine given against illness
apo	from or back	apology, words withdrawn
caco	bad	cacophony, a horrible noise
cata	down	catastrophe, disastrous downfall

Greek	English	Example
dia	through	dialect, through-talk, conversation, then local speech
ec, *ek*, or *ex*	out of	ecdysiast, one who sheds clothes, a strip-teaser, possibly eccentric, straying from the central or normal habits
epi	on and upon	epithet, an adjective put on a noun
eu	well	eulogy, a speaking well of, high praise
huper (our *hyper*)	over	hyperaesthesia, oversensitiveness
hupo (our *hypo*)	under	hypostasis, something standing under, a basis
meta	after	metabolism, change over
neo	new	neologism, a new term of speech
palaeo	old	palaeolithic, belonging to the Old Stone Age
peri	around	perimeter, rim
pro	before	prophecy, a fore-telling
proto	first	prototype, a first experiment or specimen

Greek	English	Example
syn	together	syntax, an orderly putting together of words (syn becomes sym if followed by labial letters, e.g. symbolism, symmetry, and sympathy)

The principal Latin prefixes are in many cases similar to the Greek, but we may chiefly notice:

ante	before, and not to be confused with the Greek *anti* meaning against	antecedent, fore-runner
dis	separate and so possibly opposed	dispute, separate opinion
extra	additional, and beyond	extraordinary
extro	outside	extrovert, one who exposes and reveals his mind and character
intro	inwards and within	introvert, the opposite type, a turned-in, secretive person
post	after	post-prandial, after-lunch
praeter	beyond	preternatural, beyond the ordinary or expected

satis	enough	satisfactory, doing enough
sub and *subter*	under	subterfuge, escape in a low way
ultra	beyond	ultra modern, excessively new-fashioned

This list is a brief one, but it may help to start the interpretation of strange words much used in the language of inventors and the sciences.

In addition to the prepositions it is useful to know the meaning of a number of Greek words which are constantly used in philosophy as well as science. There is the case of philosophy itself. *Philein* is the Greek for to love: so the 'phil' words signify a friendly addiction to this or that. Sometimes this element is put in front, as in philosophy, which is love of wisdom, or philately, which is the love of postage-stamps, or at the end as in Francophil, a lover of France and French ideas and practices.

Since the Greek *misein* is to hate, words including that element convey the meaning of dislike. *Anthropos* was the Greek for a man and *gune* (gyne in our spelling) was Greek for a woman, so our misanthropist is one who hates, or at least dislikes and avoids, his fellows and a misogynist is a hater of women. *Logos*, already explained as Greek for word and then for learning, has created the huge number of words ending in -ology. So an anthropologist is a student of the habits of men, usually of primitive man, and a gynaecologist is a doctor who has specialised in the ailments of women.

Philanthropists are those who are disposed to love their fellows, but one does not commonly speak of philogynists for those who take a good view of women. But that word has as much right to exist as has misogynist.

The root *tele* (two syllables) which we have adopted in the popular Telly for Television, comes from the Greek *telos*, meaning an end or a distant thing. So the *tele* words imply space and remoteness. Telegram and telephone have been mentioned. *Gramma* and *graphe* are Greek words for writing and picture, and they are elements constantly employed. A cryptogram is Greek for hidden writing. A monograph, based on the Greek *monos* meaning single or alone, is a separate piece of writing on a single object or class of objects. Monograph is mentioned here because so many have read some, if not all, of the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which the great detective frequently says that he is writing a monograph on this or that abstruse theme.

Mono is a word-element of frequent use. Monopoly, for instance, is our form of the Greek for single selling. The monopolist, who flourished profitably in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First when noblemen were granted sole rights in this or that form of trading, is the alone-salesman or one who has united all the sellers into one group which can thus control prices. So a word which begins with mono will indicate something single: monotony properly means 'having little or no variation in tone or cadence', but it has been extended from singleness of sound to singleness and sameness of subject. The monotonous speaker now describes one

who not only makes the same kind of noise but keeps repeating the same idea or set of ideas.

Among other Greek words that are constantly appearing in scientific books and lectures are *ge* for land or the earth and hydro (from Greek *hudor*) for water. Hence geology for knowledge of the earth's constituents and geometry for measuring land, a craft from which sprang the modern name of the mathematical science traditionally invented by Euclid. We hear now the adjective geophysical and that brings in the Greek word *phusis* which meant the power of growing and was widened to include all that we term Nature. The hydro words have been very plentiful. Hydropathic establishments, hotels where people went for special curative baths, are not so common as they were, but the name lives on here and there in the abbreviated Hydro. *Pathein* in Greek was to suffer and there are many terms which contain this element; a psychopath is one psychologically afflicted. But by an odd confusion the root is sometimes included in naming those who cure and do not suffer the disease in question. An osteopath, for instance, is one who treats bone-troubles and not he who has to endure them. (The osteo part of it comes from the Greek for a bone.)

In medical matters Latin or Greek word-elements have been adopted in a haphazard way. A dentist is a Latin attender to our teeth, but he might have had the imposing Greek label of odontologist. We may go to an osteopath when our bones ache, but we hear of a cerebral tumour if we have a lump on the brain. A psychopath may acquire Latin labels if he is stricken

also in the mind and is the victim of mental deficiency or derangement.

A Greek word is given to the foot-healer and cutter of corns: he is the chiropodist. *Cheir* was the Greek for a hand and *pous* for a foot. Cheir is also to be found in the word surgeon, who was originally a chirurgeon, a worker healing by handcraft as distinct from the medical man who diagnoses and treats disease. But the manicurist is a Roman, *manus* being the Latin for hand and not to be confused with *mania* which is the Greek for madness. The chemist owes his name to the Greek *khumos* which was the juice or infusion of a plant and applied specially to those juices with medical powers. Since the Greek 'u' became 'y' in English – *analusis*, as we saw, is turned into analysis – the chumist became the chymist. An old-established chemist's shop in Oxford long observed the classical traditions of that city by writing Chymist over the door, but this has been given up with the decline of Greek studies. Chymist was later slurred into chemist.

In the Middle Ages there was the use of the name alchemy to describe the potency of the chemist's craft, especially when it seemed to be magical. The prefix *al*, meaning the, is Arabic and appears in a number of English words; some of them were considerable mouthfuls in their original form. Algebra is one of these: this is a shortened form of *al-jabr-w-al-muqubalah*, meaning reduction and comparison of equations. It is a good thing that the difficulties of the subject have not been made worse by retaining the whole name. In alcohol and almanac the *al* prefix is

seen again, but alphabet is a combination of the first two letters in the Greek language, alpha and beta. Returning to the chemist's shop we meet, or used to meet, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, the apothecary: *apothesis* is the Greek for putting away and *apotheke* became the title of a shop or store and was specially attached to the chemist's establishment.

The termination -iatry comes from the Greek name for a healer, *iatros*, and this explains a number of our medical terms, not only psychiatry, healing of souls or characters, but pediatrics, the branch of doctoring concerned with children. *Pais* was the Greek for a child. The Greek diphthong 'ai' became 'æ' and was often shortened to 'e' in English; hence you may see this kind of medical practice written either as pædiatrics or pediatrics. The reduction to 'ped' in this case may lead to confusion since the Greek *pous* for a foot became *pes* in Latin and so foot-words taken from Latin may begin with ped in their English form, e.g. pedestrian and pedestal.

But the pedagogue is not a man who kicks his pupils. Here we are back with *pais*, the child. The pedagogue leads or guides children, since the Greek *agogos* was a leader: we meet him again in demagogue, a leader of the *demos* or people in a democracy where the power (*cratos* in Greek) lies with the majority.

Since the ancient Greeks did so much for the creation of orderly government, their word-elements are conspicuous in our political language. *Arche* (two syllables) meant rule, hence monarchy, rule of one, oligarchy, rule of a few, and anarchy, no rule at all.

Oligoi were the few. The prefix *a* or *an* meant not, as in the word agnostic, used of a man who says that he cannot know about the existence of God, or atheist, the man who denies that existence altogether.

The word-elements in philosophical and scientific, as well as medical subjects, are so numerous that I can but skim the surface. Any large library may – and I think should – contain Eric Partridge's volume called *Origins* in which there is a comprehensive section devoted to these elements. Since it contains a hundred pages with two columns on each it is obvious that the information provided on this subject is copious. All I can do, without entering into the compilation of an entire dictionary of verbal sources, is to draw up short lists of the Greek and Latin words most commonly used in the making of technical terms in various branches of scholarship, medicine, and scientific invention. It includes some repetition of words and word-elements already mentioned, but to see them again may help to fix them in the mind:

Greek	English	Example
aither	air	ethereal
anthropos	man	anthropology, science or study of man
autos	self	autocracy, rule by a single self: the 'auto' words are very numerous and all suggest self-power, often with labour-saving results as in automatic or automation

Greek	English	Example
bios	life	biography, portrait of a life in words
cosmos	world	cosmopolitan, citizen of the world
epi	upon	epitaph, writing on tombs
ge	earth	geography, picturing and describing the earth
genos	race of people	genocide, murdering a whole race
gramma	writing	gramophone, voice written on a disc; see phone below
graphe	drawing or picture	photograph, Greek for light-picture
gune (*gyne*)	woman	gynaecology, branch of medicine concerned with women
haima	blood	haemorrhage, out-burst of blood
helios	sun	heliotrope, name given to plants which turn to the sun, also the colour of one of them
homo	together	homogeneous, of the same kind

Greek	English	Example
hudor (*hydor*)	water	hydro-electric works, providing electrical power by damming and releasing water
hupnos (*hypnos*)	sleep	hypnotism, putting into a sleepy trance
iatros	healer	psychiatry, healing of soul or character
leukos	white	leukaemia, disease caused by excess of white corpuscles in the blood
mathe	learning	mathematics
megas and *megalo*	big	megalomania, extreme self-importance
melas	black	Melanesian Islands, inhabited by dark people
micros	little	microscope, invention for observing very small things
pathein	to suffer	pathology, the study or science of disease
philein	to love	philharmonic, loving concord or harmony
phone	voice or sound	phonetics, science of correct sound-production and speech

Greek	English	Example
pur (*pyr*)	fire	pyrotechnics, fireworks
techne	art or craft	technology, study or knowledge of crafts
telos	end or distance	television, the conveyance of pictures to viewers over a distance
therapeia	healing	therapy, a curative process; psychotherapy, healing of soul or character
trauma	wound	traumatic experience, used in psycho-analysis for an experience that has left a scar on the subconscious
zoe	life	zoology, science of living things
Latin	**English**	**Example**
ambo	both	ambidextrous, a queer word, which ought to mean having two right hands, but does mean using both hands equally well
aqua	water	aquatics, swimming
aurum	gold	auriferous, gold-bearing
caelum	heaven or sky	celestial, heavenly

Latin	English	Example
corpus	body	incorporated, embodied with
dexter	on the right	both dexterous and sinister got additional meanings, the former signifying handy in general and the latter ill-omened
facere	make	manufacture, making with hand and then making with machinery
filius and *filia*	son and daughter	affiliated, literally made a child of but generally meaning attached to
oculus	eye	oculist
pes	foot	pedometer, instrument for measuring distance covered by one's feet
satis	enough	satisfactory
terra	earth	subterranean, under the earth
valere	to be strong	validity of facts as well as of body; valetudinarian, a fusser about health, same as Greek hypochondriac

Latin	English	Example
verus	true	verisimilitude, likeness to truth
vita	life	vitamins, accessory food-factors deemed essential to promoting full life or vitality (the phrase 'vital statistics' should mean statistics about human life and population and not bodily measurements. These should be corporal statistics)

Earlier in this chapter allusion was made to the curious way in which the scientists and inventors have relied upon the classical languages in making up their vocabulary at a time when the proportion of people receiving a classical education grows steadily smaller. But there is one advantage in this: the same kind of words are adopted in many languages at once. For example, if some learned doctors in England decided to hold a conference on radio-cardiography their no less learned European colleagues would understand what was meant. But they might be perplexed if they had to work out this dictionary definition: 'Graphic presentation of the blood circulation through the heart, recorded by observing the passage of injected radio isotypes by means of a special Geiger counter.' Also a foreigner who might be puzzled by hearing of

an atom-smasher would not be confused if he read of it in the Greek form of cyclotron. Furthermore, long words of classical formation may avert still longer explanations: the surgeon in an army hospital who needs 'an instrument for getting three-dimensional views of foreign matter in the patient's body, such as a bullet or splinter', would save time, and would presumably be understood in foreign places, if he asked for a stereofluoroscope. The nurse who arranged for him to have it might have no idea why the instrument was so called, but the label, though long and mysterious, provides a short-cut to the necessary action. Greek and Latin are sometimes spoken of as 'dead languages'. But they have a new life in the laboratory which, however baffling to the layman, is useful because it is international.

CHAPTER NINE

WORDS AND HABITS

Journalists are accused of writing clichés and the cliché is regarded, often too severely, as a deplorable thing. The word is French for something clicked and comes from the printing trade. The cliché was a metal block used for printing pictures and turning out the picture in numbers; so it came to be applied to language in which words and phrases are constantly and mechanically repeated. Because of that repetition these have lost their early impact and yet they have been useful enough to get fixed in the language. In many cases they were the product of invention and imagination: now the image which they first evoked is no longer fresh and forcible; yet we go on using it. For example, the first person to say 'I shook in my shoes' created the picture of somebody trembling all over and down to the ground. But now, if we hear somebody described as shaking in his shoes, we do not think of violent physical tremors reaching to the toes: we may visualise no more than a state of some alarm. Yet phrases of that kind, however tired they become, do not disappear.

Everybody uses what a keen critic of language would call clichés. Journalists are not especially guilty of cliché-writing: they offend no more than the rest of us. They use a lot of clichés because they write a lot of

sentences, just as public speakers pour out clichés because they pour out a lot of spoken matter. In our day-to-day conversation we can hardly escape uttering numbers of cliché words and phrases. I said at the start that the cliché is regarded as deplorable by those who watch their language strictly. Deplorable or not, it seems to be inevitable. We can, with vigilance, cut down the number of clichés in our writing and our conversation; we can hardly get rid of them altogether. If I here remark that clichés continue because we are the slaves of custom it can be said that 'slaves of custom' is itself a cliché. The phrase once suggested somebody fettered to his habits, but the urgency has gone out of the image. That is true. But let anyone try to write a letter of any length without setting his mind firmly on the task of avoiding clichés and he will find that the clichés have crept in.

He may have said, for instance, that on an occasion mentioned he was left in the lurch. If asked what exactly a lurch is, he almost certainly could not provide an explanation. Lurch, used as a verb, once meant to cheat or rob. Shakespeare used it so. Also as both verb and noun it means violent sideways movement. Do people who describe themselves as 'left in the lurch' mean that they have been cheated or that they are caught in the act of slipping? Probably neither; they usually mean that they are left in a dilemma or just alone. It is possible that the phrase comes from a situation in the game of cribbage. But few who employ the phrase know anything about cribbage nowadays. Yet we still go on saying that we are 'left in the lurch'.

At least in doing so we are not being vague or mysterious: people will know what we mean. I cannot see much harm in that kind of cliché.

Alliteration has a great attraction for speakers and writers and is frequently and beautifully employed in the finest poetry, a subject too large to be discussed here. Doubling of words that have similar meanings also appears to satisfy the eye and ear. So there may be a very long life for phrases in which words beginning with the same letter repeat the same or an allied meaning. Examples of that are 'bag and baggage', 'cool, calm, and collected', 'dead and done for', 'death and damnation', 'fret and fume', 'safe and sound', 'all the world and his wife'. Repetition without alliteration also has a constant appeal, as in 'dust and ashes', 'leaps and bounds', 'pick and choose', 'nevertheless and notwithstanding', 'stress and strain'. Nothing, I think, will stop people clicking out phrases of this kind. They can seem misplaced and tiresome in the best kind of writing, but one must be very fussy to object to their appearance in normal talk and casual correspondence. If somebody mentions in a letter about an awkward situation that he remained 'cool as a cucumber' I am not disturbed because it is a cliché which has been used a myriad times before.

Many phrases which are now put in the cliché class have been taken from the finest literature, especially from the English Bible and the poetry of Shakespeare. One of the greatest editors for whom I have been fortunate to work, an editor who wrote his own leading articles, could have been accused of letting in

the cliché. He would talk of the 'heat and burden of the day', which incidentally is a misquotation of the Biblical 'burden and heat of the day', an error presumably made because the misquoted form comes more easily on the tongue. He would not bar the also Biblical 'gall and wormwood' in describing something bitter for a statesman to face.

The Shakespearean clichés have become and remain extremely numerous. The imaginative life has gone out of them with time and they may now be regarded as pallid verbal ghosts, but custom preserves them. When Shakespeare wrote of Cleopatra's beauty that 'it beggared all description' he was, I fancy, creating that phrase for the first time and those who first heard it would have a striking mental glimpse of the speaker bereft of words and groping like an eager mendicant for adjectives adequate to the radiant loveliness of the Egyptian Queen. The success of a piece of verbal imagery naturally leads, as it has done in this case, to its being worked to death (is that a cliché?) and so creating much less effect than it should do. To say nowadays that something beggars all description does not mean much: we do not visualise the powers of descriptive speech reduced to utter poverty.

Shakespeare was such a fertile coiner of phrases apt to all feelings, events, and characters ('to coin a phrase' has become a cliché in our time) that his plays have contributed enormously to the store of language which has become established in the popular mind and has been rubbed bare by the myriads of users. Many of these do not know that they are quoting and very

few could accurately name the play or passage on which they are drawing. It was Shakespeare who wrote of 'the whirligig of time' (in *Twelfth Night*) and we hear the words often: and why not, for they still give a vivid image? If popular taste has seized on the words of great creators like Shakespeare and Dickens and embedded them in common speech and writing we are taking from the best: inevitably the value is diminished by endless exploitation, but are we to be blamed for liking and laying hands on the best that the great word-coiners have minted? Shakespeare invented 'snapper up of unconsidered trifles' for a thief and posterity has been wise to snap this up.

Clichés become a nuisance when they are not only echoes of a once vivid mental image but pompous unions of antiquated, unusual, and lengthy words. In answering a question about something that has been forgotten it is much better to say simply that it was forgotten and not that it was 'consigned to oblivion'. Cheers should ring out and not 'make the welkin ring'. People should manage to raise themselves and not 'pull themselves up by their boot-straps': how many of us, except when riding, have boot-straps now? Even were those articles widely present, it is an odd form of exercise to pull oneself up by them. Yet one continually meets this idiotic cliché. There are hoary old phrases, such as 'of that ilk' for of that family, and 'a man of that kidney', used by Shakespeare for a man of that kind, which, when hauled out for present use, seem stupidly affected.

There is affectation also in the needless introduction

of foreign words. People writing about the arts are prone to this. I can see no reason for calling the work of a painter his *œuvre* or congratulating him on his *bienséance* instead of his good taste. Dragging in Latin phrases where the English would do quite as well is a vexatious form of showing off. I recently read in a political article that the Government, *omnibus bene gerentibus*, would take some kind of action. This indicated only that the Government would act if all were well. There is no good reason why the first and last point in a subject should be called by the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, or why carrying a thing on to the end should be named as '*à l'outrance*'. There may be times when a foreign language provides a useful word for which we have no alternative, but as a rule we can manage very well with our own tongue.

One thing which we can give up with advantage is the use of adjectives which are always reappearing tagged on to the same nouns and sometimes to one noun only. A case of that is 'condign punishment'. Condign, meaning adequate and merited, is scarcely ever used elsewhere nowadays. We never speak of a condign reward. Astronomical, applied to figures, is another example. It is very easy to slip into the habit of bringing out almost automatically words of this familiar kind. When new-minted by the coiner of the phrase they had a vivid brightness, but they have faded into a commonplace drabness. Before writing this I had noticed that a journalist, who writes simply and accurately and without any effort at phrase-

making, mentioned 'the astronomical rise in the cost of living'. The cost of living has risen too many times during this century to be pleasant, but its multiplication has certainly not been in terms of millions. The first person to write of 'astronomical figures' was probably thinking of or visualising the countless stars in countless galaxies to be seen in a clear night-sky; but then his image for immense numbers was turned into a cliché and so heavily over-worked that the adjective has lost its association with a star-spangled firmament and now stands only for very big or numerous.

Other cliché adjectives occur in 'momentary aberration' for sudden loss of mind (don't we ever aberrate for a whole minute or two?) and 'hectic moments' for a time of excitement or annoyance. Hectic should bring to mind a flush of high fever: it was once a powerful and colourful adjective taken from the sick-room. But now it only signifies 'a bit worked-up'. One may hear somebody say, 'My dear, I was absolutely hectic!' when really they were only a bit vexed. Livid has gone the same way. Meaning of a leaden blue colour, like the word hectic it has come to mean only angry. Colossal is another victim. It should be a tremendous word since the Colossus of the island of Rhodes in the Levant was a huge bronze statue of the Sun God at the mouth of the chief harbour: it was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world and needed an earthquake to overthrow it. So the word colossal should suggest something really gigantic and superlatively vast, but we have put it to such drudgery that a colossal score in a game may only mean a large one and

a colossal achievement no more than a big bit of work favourably viewed. We may celebrate what we call a colossal achievement with a party: nothing is gained by introducing such weary phrases as 'a festive occasion' or 'a sumptuous repast'.

Why must we always place 'implicit confidence' in somebody trusted? Implicit only means inset or implicated. Among the phrases with fixed adjectives are 'ample opportunities' for plenty of chances. The fact that an adjective runs easily on the lips often helps to cause its mechanical repetition. Ample 'clicks' with opportunities, whereas plentiful or numerous is not so easily spoken. Another favourite fixture is a 'crashing bore'. This is a silly adjective in this position, since bores do not crash: they wear one slowly down. A grinding or a flattening bore would make better sense: but crashing has won and has received a cliché status. Now all bores crash.

There are vogues in words as in everything else: men and women are imitative creatures and like to be in the fashion with their clothes and dresses, their amusements and their ways of talking. So we have always a series of vogue phrases which last for a while and then are dropped. Often they are expressions of admiration, especially in feminine conversation. At one time everything liked was divine, however earthy or even trivial its kind. So if that did not suggest sufficient appreciation, the article in question, a play or a player, a party, a friend, or a holiday resort, became 'too divine'. How does one become more godlike than a god? When that phrase was exhausted the object of

... since bores do not crash:

they wear one slowly down.

praise was called 'out of this world'; here was another effort to lift things into the heavens. (I had almost written celestial regions, but in that case I could be

censured for using a cliché.) How ridiculous the use of 'out of this world' can be I realised when a shopkeeper, who is a vigorous and assiduous salesman, assured me that a brand of biscuits was 'out of this world'. Perhaps they should have been labelled 'manna' to cap their supposed arrival from above.

Vogue words can become fashionable with an altered meaning. Nobody now is said to be resting: people in the news, when photographed in their gardens or on holiday, are always described as relaxing; a dealer in clichés would call them giants refreshed. To speak of anyone today as a relaxed personality is to give high praise. One may even see athletes and players of games written of as giving a beautifully relaxed performance. But to the Victorians that would have seemed to be a contradiction in terms. For them to be relaxed was to resemble what is still called a relaxing climate and to be dull and sluggish. Charlotte Brontë in her novel *Villette* wrote of a person having 'a relaxed and feeble character', thus dismissing him as lazy and worthless. But the meaning has been completely reversed because we are so conscious of strain and hustle in the life of today. To be relaxed is now to be calm, free of nerves, and so efficient.

Sophisticated is another favourite of our time. Sophia is the Greek for wisdom and a girl with that name ought therefore to be properly regarded as learned and profound. But the name Sophist was given to a kind of teacher who misused wisdom and became a clever quibbler: so the adjective sophisticated came to be applied to smart practice, lax morals, and at last

to smartness of any kind, even in costumes. One even reads in fashion-notes of 'these sophisticated shoes'. In our use of the word we have moved a long way, perhaps with pointed toes and stiletto heels, from the ancient wisdom.

The use of vogue words is inevitable and only a very strict judge of correctness would censure it altogether. So is the use of clichés. They are convenient, ready to hand, or rather to the lips, and savers of time and trouble. We really cannot expect ordinary people to think out new images and original phrases: our language has its limits of possible invention and further freshening. It would be no improvement to say, when alarmed, that you quivered in your boots or slippers instead of shivered in your shoes. It can be argued that it is quite enough to say simply that you were very much frightened; but it is only natural to feel that such plain speaking has a dull and flat effect.

In his *Dictionary of Clichés* Eric Partridge includes a large number of phrases which I do not regard as tiresome clichés. What is wrong, for example, with 'a rough idea', 'a persistent rumour', and 'so far, so good'? These phrases, listed as clichés by Mr Partridge, are easily understood and are in no way pretentious. But to keep on repeating familiar quotations can be a tedious habit. 'More sinned against than sinning' was a striking phrase when Shakespeare coined it. But the strength has gone out of it. 'Howling wilderness' was a powerful description of beasts roaring or screaming in a solitude dangerous to man when the translators of the Old Testament invented it.

But the words have been used so often to describe even a minor form of desolation that there is no menace left in the howl. To be avoided is the cliché with a classical allusion like 'in the arms of Morpheus', for asleep, or 'a Pyrrhic victory' for a battle in which the seeming winners lose as much as they gain. Such phrases have an air of sham learning since those who use them often do not know their origin. How many uttering the former phrase know that Morpheus in the Greek myths was the son of Sleep and God of Dreams? Few could say who King Pyrrhus was and when and where he lost his battle. (He was a King of Epirus who at a place called Asculum in 279 B.C. had a victory over the ancient Romans which did his side no good.) Clichés of this kind may, to use another cliché already mentioned, be 'consigned to oblivion'. But that is no reason for minding one's language so carefully as to be always avoiding every phrase that has been commonly employed because it is simple, effective, and easy to say.

CHAPTER TEN

WORDS OF YOUR OWN

There can be no simple recipe for good writing, but one preparation is obvious, namely good and plentiful reading. By that I do not mean limiting yourself to what are called Good Books, that is to say the accepted classics of English literature and the prose and poetry which are made part of one's education. Such reading, when not imposed, can be excellent recreation especially when the reader starts to discover for himself the pleasure of being carried along by a master of narrative or by one who can weave a spell of words. But that discovery should not be forced or hurried: many of the books which we are supposed to read and enjoy are not properly understood by those whose experience of life is inevitably limited by their years. For example, I should not recommend to any very young reader Jane Austen's novels, since their subtle observation of character and of the human comedy to be found in quiet lives will be better appreciated later on. I say this because I myself made the mistake of too early an approach. I thought as a boy that I ought to read *Pride and Prejudice* and, on attempting to do so, was thoroughly bored and so deterred from reading Jane Austen's other books for too long a time.

Good reading, therefore, is happy reading and all must find their own happiness for themselves from the

earliest children's books to the works of the accepted masters. Good reading, which is an essential aid to good writing, should be watchful as well as eager. This does not mean going slow when the story sweeps you on: but there should be time to notice how the writer who grips the attention manages to do so. The book will not seize the reader's mind if the prose is cumbrous and confused and if the words employed are either colourless on the one hand or pretentious rarities on the other. The watchful reader does not spoil his own pleasure in the plot of a tale by noticing how famous authors create their pictures of places and persons and how they use their words as paint in making their verbal portraits and landscapes. It is also well to notice the shape and length of sentences and how the words are made to run easily and even musically. The reader is also a listener.

It is natural for any young reader who is greatly attracted by an author to seek to imitate him closely when starting to write. But this is dangerous, especially if that author has a set of conspicuous mannerisms. Previous ages have all had their own methods of telling a story or expressing opinions and these old forms of writing would not suit most readers or the setters of school examinations if followed in our own time. An obvious example is the work of Charles Lamb whose *Essays*, written under the assumed name of Elia, have the fascination of the author's cordial, genial, and whimsical personality and are rich in the relish of life's oddities and humours. We are expected to read Lamb, but we should not try to be Lamb-like.

He wrote in a style which was acceptable a century and a half ago but is often too flowery and affected for us now. Lamb loved long Latin words. He would say 'methinks' instead of 'I think' and would address things as well as people as Thou. When he wanted to praise 'The Old Margate Hoy' (Hoy was a sailing-ship) he did so thus:

> Can I forget thee, thou old Margate Hoy, with thy weatherbeaten, sunburnt captain, and his rough accommodations – ill exchanged for the foppery and fresh-water niceness of the modern steam-packet? To the winds and waves thou committedst thy goodly freightage, and didst ask no aid of magic fumes, and spells, and boiling caldrons. With the gales of heaven thou wentest swimmingly; or, when it was their pleasure, stoodest still with sailor-like patience. Thy course was natural, not forced, as in a hot-bed; nor didst thou go poisoning the breath of ocean with sulphureous smoke.

That was written in 1823. We do not like that kind of literary playfulness today. One can read Lamb agreeably if one sees him in his own time. He is not to be made a model for us in our time.

People talk of literary style. I remember being rebuked in my boyhood for lack of this mysterious thing called style and told to read various past and famous authors in order to acquire it. I think that this was very bad advice: it only led to foolish efforts to be a mimic. Then I discovered a definition of style which seemed to be thoroughly sensible. Dean Swift said that

style was 'proper words in proper places'. Of course that leaves one to discover what are the proper words and the proper ways to place them, but it does suggest the abandoning of imitation and the acceptance of words as tools which must be set to work on the material in one's mind. The craftsman in the workshop is shaping things for use; if he is making furniture he must have definite ideas about the table or chair or cupboard he is going to make and the purposes which they are going to serve. If he thinks of decoration before utility he may turn out something which is only fussy and not practical. The writer's desk is a workshop. We are all craftsmen even if we are only writing a letter. The English language is our tool-box and its words are our implements just as much as pen and ink.

The carpenter knows exactly what he wants to make and the writer must be just as certain about his purpose. Many people find it difficult to clear their minds before they start to put words on paper, but they will never get 'proper words in proper places' unless they have done some proper thinking first. One often hears the remark, 'I know what I want to say but I can't say it'. The answer to that is that the speaker is deceiving himself: he does not really know what he wants to say. He is confused and wants to start writing before he has done any thinking. That leads only to a verbal muddle. A most important thing is to be sure about the exact meaning of abstract words in common use. Political discussions abound in these words and, unless they are clearly defined, the result is confusion.

Let us consider a school-boy who is faced with this

essay-subject: 'There can be no liberty without democracy. Comment on that.' It would be easy to plunge into a theme of this kind and get stuck in the process. So to begin with, there must be some thinking as to meaning of the two nouns, Liberty and Democracy. First it is plain that total liberty is an impossible ideal since it would mean that anybody should be free to do what he likes and get what he likes by any means that he likes, even if it involves violence. This would completely destroy the liberty of others. There is

nobody less free than a dead man. So liberty must be limited, if life is to be tolerable, and limited by law and order.

Is that necessary mixture of law and order provided by democracy? This leads to the question of what is democracy. It is generally defined as government of the people by the people for the people. But who are the people in this case? All adult citizens. They cannot all be busy governing. They can only govern themselves by voting, freely and without pressure, for other people to govern them and thus get the kind of governors they want. Democracy with its elections allows them to do so, but do the elected rulers, even if they have to be re-elected from time to time, really create the right mixture of liberty with law? A majority of voters elect a Government, but that Government may be quite tyrannical when elected: it could even persecute the minority or impose severe restrictions on the liberty of individuals. So democracy, a system easily misused, cannot guarantee liberty for certain. But is it more likely to create a better mixture of liberty with law than government by a dictator or by an established governing class?

Probably the answer is yes, but it would be possible to have an undemocratic rule with no elections which could be popular if the ruler or rulers were content to let the people live in the way they like. After all, many people do not want the bother of making decisions and taking responsibility. There have been numerous recent examples of nations which apparently are quite content to be led and to be given orders. The idea of

liberty demands that, if people prefer to be ruled instead of trying to rule – and that preference has existed and still exists in Fascist and Communist countries – they should be left to do without the machinery of elections which democracy creates. The Russians and Chinese call their dictatorship by a single, small, and disciplined party, People's Democracies. Is that phrase merely humbug? Mostly it is humbug, but we must not complacently assume that our way of electing rulers by mass-voting is bound to give us all the liberty we want.

Thoughts of this kind might occur to anybody who is considering the subject of the essay which I have mentioned. The examinee who has sorted out as far as he can, which is not easy, the various meanings of liberty and democracy and cleared his mind on these points is likely to write a much better answer than if he drives ahead without this preparation. That is true of all writing about abstract nouns such as beauty or happiness. What does one mean by calling things beautiful? Artists have very different views about that and the subject is extremely complicated. But one ought to have a view of one's own, however elementary and simple. Again, we all want to be happy: but we may not be sure what happiness is. Is it, for example, identical with pleasure?

Once clear ideas have been formed on subjects like this, writing becomes much easier: and that writing should have clarity as its first purpose. It should avoid long, straggling sentences. It should avoid long words about whose meaning the writer is himself vague.

There is the temptation to try to look learned by piling up words of that kind and many people who ought to know better yield to this temptation and so write mistily and pompously.

Moreover, whether he likes it or not, the writer must obey accepted rules of spelling and punctuation. Only during the last two centuries has English spelling been fixed: in Shakespeare's time people were free to spell very much as they chose and they did not spell the names of other people, and even their own names, in the same way. The Shakespeare family were written of as Shakespeare, Shakspeare, Shakspear, Shaksper, and even Shagsper. But we have decided that liberty of spelling is a greater nuisance in general than it is a convenience to careless people. So now we have to conform, however difficult that may be. Certainly it is difficult, since our agreed spelling is unreasonable and confusing. Some people naturally wish to reform it, but their plans, however sensible, do not win such strong support that a change is made. So we have to plod on and learn our spelling the hard way.

One method of easing the strain is the watchful reading that I have already mentioned. It is helpful, when reading, to get to know the look of words. Those gazing, however idly, at a television screen have to do some reading of titles and so on. So why not take the chance, even while you are being entertained, to keep an eye on the words used and the letters they contain? Newspapers and advertisements and any kind of notice or statement that appears in public places may also be watched in this way so that the spelling of words

becomes fixed in the mind. It is strange that people should mis-spell words which they are seeing properly spelled every day of the week.

There would be less trouble in memorising correct spelling if those who spell badly took the trouble to read carefully and watchfully. The young are lucky in having much better memories than the old and, if they will bother to do so, they should be able to remember the spellings they have seen in print. The important thing is to make oneself accustomed to the look of words. The absurdly complicated spellings and pronunciations of our words which contain the syllable 'ough' can only be mastered by habit: no amount of reasoning will help us to plough our way thoroughly through this rough subject in the way we ought with enough success though we think about it with tough and doughty perseverance! We have to get used to such tiresome variations and accustom our eyes to them so that we come to see what is right and wrong almost by instinct. While reading over what one has written one ought to know at a glance if there is something wrong because the mis-spelled word looks unusual.

An immense amount has been written about punctuation, and the subject will not receive another treatise from me, since my subject is words. Full stops and lesser stops are put into sentences to help the reader by breaking up a monotonous flow of words. They also serve to indicate the pauses in the writer's thoughts. If the flow of words is not allowed to become a flood and go splashing all over the page the problem

of punctuation is made simpler: and if the writer has a clear idea as to what he intends to say the pauses in his thoughts will come naturally.

Writing can be so chopped up that it becomes jerky and irritating. I wonder if anything is gained if a story is told in this way:

'He comes to the door. He knocks. No answer. He looks in. There is a body. Mutilated. It does not move. No heart-beat. Dead, he thinks. Dead. He may be accused of murder. He turns faint. He falls senseless. Close to the corpse. Another knock. Enter the police.'

In that the author is using what is called 'the historic present', that is to say he is describing past events as though they were happening now. Sometimes the trick is effective. But, if it is overdone, it is tiresome. The author is also overdoing the short sentence with repeated full stops and even without a verb. The reader may feel that the writer is trying too hard to create tension and to be dramatic. Let us alter the method of story-telling. The whole passage might be written without a single full stop.

'When he came to the door and knocked he got no answer and, looking in, he saw a body which did not move and had been mutilated, a body whose heart had ceased to beat, thus convincing him that it was dead and that he might be accused of murder, a thought which caused him to fall and lie fainting and senseless beside the corpse until there was another knock due to the arrival of the police.'

That is so clumsy that it would bore the reader and make him throw the book aside. But the jerky method

may soon worry him just as the long, trailing sentence soon wearies him.

There is a middle way between the two styles. The passage might run like this.

'When he came to the door and knocked there was no answer. Looking in, he saw a motionless, mutilated body. Feeling no heart-beat, he thought that it must be dead and that he might be accused of murder. He fell fainting and senseless beside the corpse. There was another knock at the door, the knock of the police.'

That style of writing may not seem so exciting at a glance as the jerky one. But when one is faced by page after page of a book, sentences of moderate length and moderately punctuated make easier reading than does the breathless manner which fires out full stops like a machine-gun.

As to the words themselves, the words which have to be spelled and punctuated, some advice has been given in previous chapters. We have a rich and varied language. It has been finely used in books of all kinds and remains to be used in all its fullness. The wider one's reading the larger is one's store of words. The language that is met in this way may appeal to one in several ways; it may strike one as amusing, strange, forcible, and vividly suggesting what is described or discussed. With a dictionary which gives definitions there is the further fun of finding out the curious origins of the words we are always using but do not think about. But, while finding and getting the feel of words which one did not know before can be a happy occupation, it is rash to pick out too many unfamiliar

names for things and throw them all at once into a single paragraph. The people who are going to read what you write do not like being puzzled or made to feel ignorant by the sight of a lot of unknown words.

For example, I happened in the same day to come across two scarcely known adjectives for unpleasant things or people. One was slaistered which means ill-painted and so messed about or defiled. It would be apt enough to say of a girl with a slap-dash, over-done make-up that she was slaistered and I think that most people would understand and appreciate what was in the writer's mind. Slaistered! It seems to speak for itself. The other adjective was sloomy, meaning sluggish and dull, and also very expressive. It would be imprudent to say that the slaistered young woman was just brushing off the attentions of a sloomy young man. The reader might decide that the use of two rare words in rapid succession was a form of showing-off and so be put against the writer. Showing-off reminds me of another old word, sprunking, which means dressing up for display. If that were used nowadays it would have to be made obvious to the reader what it meant and should not be linked with another pleasant but now rare term like a frisk for a night-out. To write today of a slaistered girl sprunking for a frisk would seem extremely affected. We want to bring back forgotten words into use if they deserve their revival. But it must be done singly and gradually and not with a cluster of such terms which would mystify and aggravate.

It is right that we should be a little and occasionally

sprunkish in our writing and so help ourselves to escape from a sloomy look in what is written. And let us avoid altogether the heavy formality of the official English with which we are badgered and bored in Government forms and business letters. The best writing is that which appears to come freely, easily, and naturally. Of course it may not be so easy to achieve that because our minds are inevitably cluttered up with stale phrases and the clichés of which I have written. These have to be shaken off and that is hard work. But if it can be done and simple, spontaneous, and lively phrases put in the place of the terms which are tired out by over-work, the result will have a valuable air of freshness and sincerity. In descriptive writing the long and even rare word may be effective, but in giving news and views in letters or essays the short and simple are to be preferred. So I do not finalise or terminate this book. I end it.

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